

We Fall Back Together by **Timewriter21**

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Hurt-Comfort, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., J. Hopper, Joyce B., Mike W.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2019-07-20 22:00:04

Updated: 2019-10-12 18:16:02

Packaged: 2019-12-12 14:22:01

Rating: T

Chapters: 9

Words: 31,185

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: “Blood streamed from my nose and ears. I pushed back harder than ever before. I am going to kill you.” This is an exploration of El’s battle with the Mind Flayer at the end of season two and the direct aftermath. Contains multiple POVs.

1. Battle

This is an exploration of Eleven's battle with the Mind Flayer in season two of the show and of the aftermath. It might also explore that month break between the Mind Flayer battle and the snowball scene. I have been toying with this idea for over a year and the release of season three has jumped my writing batteries and given me inspiration. I hope you enjoy.

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things. All rights belong to the Duffer Brothers, etc.

:

Eleven

The car rumbled to a lurching stop, parked haphazardly in the middle of the Hawkins Lab parking lot. A feeling of numbness began seeping in my chest. Hopper got out of the car and immediately walked to the trunk. I stepped outside into the dark, chilly air. The lab towered above us. Through the windows I could see the the emergency lights pulsating. I could hear even from outside the eerie ring of the emergency bells.

"Let me take the lead kid. Save your strength for what really matters," said the gruff policeman walking up behind me. He was holding a large black gun in his hands. Another was strapped across his back as well as the small silver one he always keeps in his holster.

I have him a small nod in return, my heart nearly beating out of my chest. After I escaped Hawkins Lab, I vowed never to return. Memories of cruel hands, dark bruises, white cats, and suffocating rooms sped through my mind. I felt my breath verging on hyperventilation when a warm hand rested on my shoulder.

I flinched instinctively before looking up into kind, reassuring eyes. Jim Hopper really was a nice man, even when he didn't always show it. Taking a deep breath, I gave another nod indicating I was ready to go inside. Slowly, we made our way to the entrance of the lab. It felt really strange entering a place I'd only ever ran away from.

The doors opened with a harsh squeak and we both tensed up immediately. I felt my heart in my throat. Would the sound send those demodogs right after us, killing us before we had even tried to end this nightmare? It stayed silent though. Hopper motioned me to come forward, deeming it safe for now. I let out a breath I hadn't known I'd been holding. As I followed after him, the stench of death, blood, and something far more putrid permeated my nose. The uncanny throbbing of the alarms did no help to my growing fear. My stomach clenched at every turn Hopper led me down. Soon, we made it to a long staircase. Halfway down, I noticed that the railing, the floors, and the walls were coated in blood. Fresh blood.

"Hopper?"

"Yeah. I see it," he said quietly, "stay here and I will see what's down there. Okay?"

I didn't want him to leave me alone, but fear held me firmly in place. "Yes," I whispered softly.

He gave my shoulder a quick squeeze. He began to creep down the crimson stairwell. My breath hitches as he turned, slowly going down the next level of stairs. I couldn't see him now. The next few minutes played out in agonizing silence. I hated not knowing what was happening. Was he hurt? Did he find one of the demodogs? Worse, was he dead?

"Eleven, you can come down now," his deep voice pronounced.

I closed my eyes and took a few breaths of relief, quieting my restless mind. He was okay. For now at least. Almost stumbling into a pool of blood, I bolted down the stairs. Two more levels down I saw him. On the far corner of the landing was an old man in a filthy lab coat. There was a large gash on his right leg bleeding profusely. I didn't recognize the man but Hopper seemed to know him.

"Dr. Owens?" Recognition bloomed on Hopper's face. "Looks like you found me chief," the man mumbled. Dr. Owens tried to sit up straighter. Hopper bent down to take a closer look at his leg.

"How bad is it?"

"You'll live," replies Hopper as he ripped a long piece of fabric from Dr. Owens' lab coat. He wrapped right before the start of the wound.

"1...2...3!" Hopper ties the bandage forcefully.

The man let out a cry of pain; he desperately looked around for a distraction. His wandering eyes landed on me. A confused expression crossed his features. I took a tentative step backwards. Noticing

Dr. Owens' gaze, Hopper took a quick glance behind him.

"Oh, that's El. She's the one who can put an end to all of this," Hopper answered to the unasked question. A look of realization dawned on his tired face. He knew who I was or at least had heard of me. A sudden coal of anger formed in my stomach. Was he also responsible for my experimentation? His badge pictures five, empty, white stars. The only other person I had seen where a badge like that was Papa. Dr. Owens must've taken over after Papa disappeared.

"After all of this you are going to help her lead a normal life. One she deserves," says Hopper.

Dr. Owens gave a nod of agreement, his eyes never leaving my face. Hopper reached for his holster and pulled out the small gun that rested there. Handing the doctor the gun, he stands up. With a curt nod to the injured man Hopper motioned for me to continue following him. Dr. Owens continued to watch as I stepped pass him down the stairs. I heard a rustling from behind; for a moment I thought he had the gun pointed at me. But when I glanced back, he had the gun firmly trained towards the top staircase. I realized he didn't have any resentment towards my previous escape from the lab. He would rather keep watch for us. Maybe he was a good man too.

I steadily followed Hopper down the stairs until we were met with a door that had a black skull and crossbones over a neon yellow circle. I don't know exactly what the sign means, but I know that no good could come from opening that door. We both froze though at the gurgling of demodogs beyond the door. I looked to Hopper, fear and worry etched on my face. He moved his gun to a suitable shooting position. He indicated for me to stay, and as silently as possible, he opens the door. My eyes closed, not wanting to see those flower-faced

dogs rip him to shreds. My heart was beating so hard I felt sick. He was going to die. I was going to die.

Everything was going in slow motion. I remember his words of letting him take the lead. I wanted nothing more than to run away. But I couldn't let him die. I stumbled through the doorway, but as soon as I entered the room the demodogs fled. They ran down the hole which led to the Gate. Reaching out with my mind I could sense heat. Something is burning. The Shadow Monster's tunnels were on fire.

Mike.

The demodogs would be after him now. All my friends were with him too. Worry pinched my gut and tears spring to my eyes. I felt like I could vomit. There wasn't anything I could do for them. I was too far away. *Please make it out safely.* I closed my eyes and took a shaky breath. I could help them by closing the gate. I had a job to do.

I looked around the dimly lit room. White particles floated through the air. They looked like snowflakes. This was the same room where I opened the Gate. Papa had taken me from my cold, bare bedroom and led me to the bath. Dustin had called it an isolation tank. There were more people than usual surrounding the bath, each one with cold, uncaring features.

"Today we make history. Today we make contact," Papa had told me. Horrible memories of entering the void, of seeing the monster flashed through my mind. The monster with its wet, slimy, decaying flesh, humanoid figure, grotesquely ripping flesh from its prey was all I could see. Terror had coiled around my spine, but Papa said I had to touch the beast. I didn't want to go back to the dark closet for disobeying. My trembling hand had reached out: inches away. The sounds coming from the monster were foul. Before I could touch the thing its head snapped around. An ear-splitting shriek had erupted from its razor-lined mouth. It began to slash at me, ripping me from limb to limb. Even being in the void, the pain felt so real. This monster wanted released and I had screamed. I screamed and I cried, pounding on the glass. I screamed so much my throat blazed with pain. My fear was a physical being: lashing out. The glass of the bath had shattered. The water rushed out and I with it. Three days later Papa had told me I opened a Gate: a Gate to hell.

The crackle of Hopper's radio brought me back to the present. I could hear a muffled voice, Jonathan's I think, say, "Close it."

It was time. My chest tightened and my heart started to pound faster and faster. Fear gripped my stomach.

"Okay, so we are going to get in this elevator and go down to where you can close the Gate," Hopper explained.

"Elevator?"

Hopper straightened his hat, edging nearer to the pit. "Oh yeah. Well an elevator is a machine," he turned grabbing my hand, "that lifts people up or down."

I gave a nod of understanding while he helped me onto the platform. It wobbled slightly under our weight. Below us was a seemingly endless chasm of pulsating dim, red light webbed in dark, slimy vines. Deep, rumbling sounds echoed from the pit as well. It sounded like the breathing of a huge, dying animal. And down we went, lower into the belly of the beast. The white particles grew in size as they hovered in the noxious air. The chains of the elevator clicked and grinded as we continued to descend. I moved to the edge of the platform and gripped the railing with white knuckles. The vines thinned until there was a large space where a membrane was visible. And then I felt him.

"Stop."

The elevator ceased its descent. The pit still continued downward, but we were far enough down that I couldn't see the top clearly. He was here though. I could feel it. A sickening sense of evil pervaded the air.

A hulking, black figure appeared behind the red, flowing membrane. Its dagger shaped head filled the space behind the membrane almost entirely. The Mind Flayer knew I was coming for him. I gasped as I felt icy tendrils grasp at my brain.

No.

I grabbed back at the vines surrounding the membrane. I raised my

right hand focusing my powers at urging the vines to move. Ever so slowly, the Gate began to close. The vines inched along heavily. Another jolt of freezing pain webbed across the top of my skull, taking my breath away.

The Mind Flayer moved from behind his heaving film. I heard gunshots and felt the elevator sway. I lost my balance and stumbled forward. The web of pain grew stronger. It now branched down my spine, across my shoulders, and nestled horribly in my chest and head. The rapid beating of my heart made me feel sick.

Boom.

Boom.

Boom.

My hand trembled and I felt an oozing warmth come from my nose and ears. I can't let this monster win. I pushed back harder against the dark force penetrating my mind. It only shoved back with new fury. My breath came out in short, labored gasps.

I was going to lose...

No.

An image of Papa appeared before my eyes. I was sitting in Kali's room, in her big swivel chair. I heard a voice from behind me. I had froze. It was Papa. He kept telling me about a wound I had. A festering wound. He said it was growing. He had said it was going to kill me. Kali's words about focusing my anger came back to me.

I reached inward and found all the fear and pain I had felt in that moment. From behind the gate, I could sense the monster's short blip of doubt.

I thought about all the times I was dragged away screaming into that closet. All the slaps across my face and the rough, painfully tight grips I faced after not completing an experiment. All the times I was forced into the bath, shrieking to be released. The loneliness and sadness I felt while being isolated in my tiny room for days on end. All of these terrifying memories fueled my rage. That hellish lab took

everything from me. My childhood. My innocence.

My everything.

They stole everything.

My wrath grew and grew. I felt myself lift off the platform. I was weightless. The Gate was now rapidly closing, the vines burning red-hot at the edges. I could feel the Shadow Monster's growing rage as well. I was screaming now, both from the the excruciating pain and the anger burning through my veins.

From the Gate sprung a swirling mass of black dust. The force coming from the spiral resonated like a terrible windstorm. The dust pulsed and quivered in time with the Gate. It was alive.

The dust sped forward, but I was faster. An invisible shield stopped it; the dust spread around it like water poured over the bottom of a bowl. I screamed louder: inhumanly possible. Both of my hands were raised. Blood streamed from my nose and ears. I pushed back harder than ever before. *I am going to kill you. You are going to die.*

You are gone.

The Gate close with a snap that echoed through the pit. I took a gasping breath, a breath which felt like the first one in ages. I felt myself falling. Then all was black.

2. Rush

Quick thanks to everyone who favorited and/or followed this story! It means a lot to me that someone enjoyed it enough to stick along for the ride. I would greatly appreciate it if you could leave a review and tell me what you think, positive or negative. Thanks!

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things; ideas or characters.

:

Hopper

I've never been so scared for someone as I am now. Seeing El close the Gate was terrifying. I'd seen her do some crazy shit, but defeating the Mind Flayer was the craziest of them all. I glanced back to see her levitate off the platform, screaming, blood oozing from her nose and ears. It shocked me to my core just how much power resides in this little girl.

I was shooting demodogs left and right, praying they wouldn't get to us, when the red light coming from the Gate went dark. I heard El gasp; I turned to see her falling. I rushed to catch her, but her falling weight took us both the floor. The pit was much darker now. From my peripheral, I could see the emaciated forms of demodogs falling lifelessly to the bottom.

"El?"

She was barely conscious, clinging weakly to the back of my coat. I held her limp form tightly in my arms. I pulled her closer and she hugged back loosely.

"You did good kid. *So good.*" I don't think I'd ever been prouder of a human being in my entire life. For a moment, I felt peace. The monster was gone and it wasn't coming back this time. I inhaled deeply, relief flooding my bones. We were safe.

And then that moment was shattered when I felt her arms go slack. I looked to her face and saw her half-closed eyes roll back in her head.

Her head lolled back painfully. She looked like death.

I felt my heart quicken. This wasn't like before when she used her powers. This was worse: much, much worse.

"El, stay with me okay? I'm gonna get you out of here," I laid her down gently and reached for the control panel, "You're going to be okay. You're gonna be fine" I said panickedly. I knew I was talking more to myself than to her. The elevator began to slowly move upwards. Too slowly.

"Dammit you piece of shit! Work!"

I was frantic now. I slammed my fists down against the panel in frustration. By some miracle the platform started moving faster. I let out a sigh and went to sit next to El again. I propped her upper half against my lap. Fresh blood continued to spill from her ears and nose. *This is bad. This is real bad.* I may be chief of police, but I sure as hell don't know what to do when it with bleeding, telekinetic, little girls. *Oh God.* I felt helpless, racking my brain for a solution.

Joyce.

She would know what to do. Joyce has this special connection with El I could never explain. Even when she was hysterical, Joyce never stopped being a mother. She could help El. I need to get El to Joyce's house as fast as I could.

Focusing my attention back on El, I saw that something needed to be done about the bleeding immediately. I shifted her position so just her head was resting on my leg. I ripped two strips off my shirt. I held them up to her ears to stem the flow of blood. Cupping my hands, I kept a steady pressure hoping it would stop the bleeding.

I was struck with a sudden memory of cupping my hands around Sara's ears whenever I would say a bad word. She always called them no-no words. My heart ached at the memory, but the jerk of the elevator ended my moment of grief. We had reached the top.

Quickly stuffing the scraps of cloth in El's ears, I picked her up with a grunt. Dear God, since when did she get so heavy? For as small as she

is, she's really heavy. Actually it's probably my fault. I've really let myself go these past months. A spike of shame went through me. I could barely pick up my daughter when she needed me most. *No. This isn't what she needs.* I shook those thoughts from my head and stepped off the platform carefully. El continued to dangle in my arms, unresponsive.

Grunting with the effort, I made my way back to the staircase and began climbing the staircase as quickly as I could. After several minutes, I was back to where Dr. Owens was sitting. His initial look of relief upon seeing me changed to horror when he saw El.

"Is she..?" *Dead.*

"No!" My voice cracked with fear.

"She...she's going to be f..fine," I told him forcefully. He nodded somberly in return, worry inscribed on his brow.

"I'll be back for you," I assured him.

Without warning, El's breathing faltered. *Oh no. Please not again.* I could hear Sara's hospital monitor clearly: too clearly. I scanned her clammy face desperate for her to breathe. Panic gripped my every fiber. I couldn't move.

At last, she drew a shaky breath. Relief washed over me; I held her tighter. With a curt nod to Dr. Owens, I ran up the last flights of stairs and quickly out of the lab. My adrenaline was high. I rushed to my truck, El's head thumping against my chest.

I set her down, propping her against a tire, while I opened the door. Once El was in the passenger's seat, I sped off wheels screeching. Her head rested against the glass; she didn't have a seatbelt. I fumbled for my radio and promptly contacted Jonathan. He picked up immediately.

"Is it done? Did you close it?" he asked frantically.

"Yeah. She did it." I glanced at her again. She was still unconscious, but the slight fog of her shallow breaths on the glass were reassuring.

"Are you home?"

"Yes," he started, "once we got that son of a bitch out of Will, we headed straight back."

"Is Joyce there?"

"Yes. Why? What's wrong?"

"It's El. She's...uh..." I could barely breathe, "it's bad, really bad. Look..uh...just be there with lots of bandages. I'll be there in ten minutes." A quick pause followed.

"Got it." He clicked off.

I kept glancing at El the rest of the ride back. Worry pitted in my stomach when I saw blood continue to flow from her nose. Blood had trickled past my makeshift bandages around her ears; a thin line of red now travelled down her neck.

Finally, I could see the Byers' house around the curve of their long driveway. Mike had burst through the door before I'd even put the car in park. Tears were evident in his eyes. I swiftly made my way around the car to where El was seated. Mike's eyes bulged upon seeing her battered figure through the window.

"El?" His voice cracked. Tears flowed freely from his eyes.

I tried to get her out the the passenger's seat but Wheeler beat me to it. He nestled her unconscious form between his arms and rushed her inside. Damn, this kid is stronger then he looks. Complete panic has bloomed on his face. My heart broke at seeing him and El. They'd been through hell and back at only fourteen years old.

As soon as Mike reached the front steps, the door opened. Four terrified faces appeared in the glowing entrance. Max, Lucas, Dustin - and my God- *Will*, who looked like he'd seen Death, instantly huddled around Mike. He plowed through them with no hesitation.

"Oh my God. El's not..." Dustin began.

"Dead," Lucas finished. Tears glistened on his dark cheeks.

"NO! El...she's..she's not...she can't!" Mike shouted at Lucas. Fear had taken over Mike. It had taken me too.

3. Shock

Hey. Sorry about the lag in updates. I've been visiting with family for the past week and I really wanted to devote my time to them fully. Thanks for all the support for this story though. I would love if you'd leave a review and tell me what you think. I appreciate constructive criticism as well. Thanks and enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger things

:

Mike

When I saw her I through the window I thought she was dead. El an empty corpse, her life stolen by the Shadow Monster. Hopper practically leaped from the truck. I beat him to the passenger's seat though. I yanked the door open and there she was. Boiling tears ran down my cheeks. *Oh God*. She looked awful. She was covered in blood. It was smeared across her whole face and was still flowing steadily from her nose and ears. I thought I could even see a few red drips fall from her lashes.

"El?" My voice broke. Fear penetrated my bones. I couldn't lose her again. *Oh God not again*.

I gently scooped her up, cradling her small body against my chest, and rushed her inside. Hopper was hot on my heels. She was so tiny, so frail, and I was terrified for her. She's never felt so small. She was always the strongest among us. I'm scared.

I bumped up the Byers' porch stairs and shouldered past my friends and laid El on the lumpy couch. Her head hung limply to the side.

I cradled her bloody face between my hands. *She's freezing*. She was so cold my fingers began to ache simply by touching her skin. She was pale as paper with blue-grey bruises peppering her whole face and neck like freckles.

"Oh my God. El's not..." I heard Dustin say. His voice was coming

from a far away place.

"Dead." Lucas finished the sentence. That damn word brought me back to reality. I whipped around to see him standing grey in front of Max.

"NO! El...she's not...she c..can't!" My voice broke again. Hearing the word made it all too possible: unbearably real. I could feel the heat of tears continuing to fall down my face. Dustin was crying now too. I failed to glare at the both of them. I'm angry; at them, the Mind Flayer, the world, *everything*.

Standing pale and in shock behind them was Hopper. He'd barely stepped inside away from the door. His breathing was hard, as if he was going to throw up at any minute. He bent over and placed his hands on his knees and drew and long breath. At last he stood up straight, towering over everyone. He gained an ounce of composure and began barking orders. I stood frozen in place, my hands still on El's face. Max was to find Joyce, *where ever she was*. Lucas and Dustin were to find a first aid kit or anything of medical value. Nancy, Steve, and Jonathan were to start cleaning up the mess in the house. I hadn't realized, but the house was a disaster. Glass still sprinkled the living room, Will's map littered each wall and floor. There was some heap in the kitchen I couldn't see. There was missing window for Christ's sake. I felt a surge of guilt for Joyce's ruined house: again.

I didn't move. I stopped listening to what Hopper was saying. I looked back at El. Crimson blood was smeared under her nose and across her dainty lips. Her breaths were shallow. I pulled one of my hands away from her cheek to brush a lock of hair from her forehead. Her slicked back, gel style was ruined. Her curls sprung out everywhere. And then I saw it.

Fresh blood. Hot, glistening blood covered my right hand. It dripped slowly down my wrist. Cold terror winded around my insides. *It's her blood.*

I noticed the bandages in her ears were soaked through. There was so much blood her throat looked as though it has been slashed. My heart clenched. My breaths were panicked while El's were slow: too slow. Hopper was pacing the rug into the ground. He saw my

alarmed expression and then he saw all the blood. He was immediately at her side. He was pressing the bandages forcefully trying to stem the flow.

"Joyce!" he called. Fresh tears spring in my eyes at hearing his voice so full of emotion. He really did love El. I heard fumbling footsteps. Suddenly a frantic Ms. Byers was in the living room; followed by Lucas, Dustin, Will, and Max. *What the hell took them so long?* Ms. Byers looked appalled upon seeing the poor state El was in. Her hands flew to cover her mouth. Max looked like she could throw up. Dustin was full out sobbing now.

"Oh...oh my God," Hopper looked up to the mumbling Joyce with red eyes, "okay...um..oh God.. okay sit her up and carefully lean her head back," she instructed. Hopper placed his hands under El's back and I supported her head as we completed the task. A red stain filled the area where her head had lain. Joyce walked over with a bundle of clean towels.

"Lucas, fill me a bowl of warm water," Joyce ushered. "Okay, now I want you to keep her head straight, tilted back, and hold these towels to her ears tightly. Th..that should help with the bleeding."

Numbly, I grabbed a hand towel and kept pressure on El's left ear. With shaking hands, Hopper did the same to her right. Joyce exited to help Lucas. Will ambled over to where Max was standing in the corner and gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. *He really was back.* It was kinda crazy to see him again. As his normal, yet tired, self. I'd never seen the feisty redhead so scared. Dustin has traded his sobbing for furiously pacing the carpet. "I'm gonna help them clean up," he announced to empty ears.

I looked from my distraught friends back to El. I couldn't hold back the fresh batch of tears and the following sniffles. She was deathly pale and felt like ice. She was like a glass figurine beneath my fingers: breakable. I sobbed at the thought of losing her. *I just got her back.*

From my peripheral, I saw Hopper exchange his old towel for a clean one. His eyes never left her face. It was as if not watching her she would crumble into dust again. I replaced my towel as well. There

seemed to be less blood than before. A few minutes later we exchanged the towels again. At long last, the bleeding seems to have stopped. Now that she wasn't in immediate danger of bleeding out I could breathe a smidgen easier. I gripped her hand like a lifeline.

Will wandered over from the kitchen with a pensive expression plaster across his features. He had changed from the hospital gown to grey sweats and a school T-shirt. He looked exhausted and purple circles covered his under eye. I didn't doubt that he felt awful for a second. Hell itself had just been exorcised from him. I felt a pang of wrongfulness at not paying attention to him knowing exactly what he's just been through.

He walked over to where Hopper and I were seated next to El's figure. He sleepily began to pick up the bloody towels we had carelessly thrown on the carpet. I wants to help him but I only hand one free hand. My other was subconsciously glued to El's left hand.

"Thanks," I mumbled, voice thick and eyes puffy. I offered a tiny smile. I heard a muted crash from the back of the house. A string of curses followed suit.

"Idiots," Will said quietly. He returned my smile. I hadn't seen him smile in what seemed like forever. I stretched my one free hand to grab his wrist before he could walk away. His eyes met mine. There weren't any words spoken between us but we could understand each other. I was so happy he was back with us again. Smiling, he have a understanding nod.

"Careful...carefuull." Joyce and Lucas were making their way over with a massive bowl of steaming water. It was dangerously full, I could see it sloshing over the sides even from the floor. Will moved out of the way as the two set the bowl down as carefully as possible.

"Honey, I think there are more hand towels under the sink in my bathroom could you bring them please?" Joyce asked her son. He nodded and went back to look for them. Lucas joined him as did Max, who seemed to be making no progress at abosorbing the chaos around her. Joyce kneeled down in front of El. Hopper searched her face as though it held all the answers to the universe.

She gripped El's knees. "Oh sweetie. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry this happened to you." Her voice was quivering. "We are going to fix you right up so you have nothing to worry about." El remained unconscious.

"Okay. Let's get her out of this jacket and into something that isn't..." *Blood soaked.* She didn't finish the sentence and instead began to work on maneuvering El's arms through the fabric. She moved her to rest against Hopper's front to fully remove the jacket. I took hold of the jacket and tossed it aside. Underneath, El was wearing a black, torn T-shirt. It too was soiled and need removing. Joyce checked to see if she was wearing another layer and she was. This proved more difficult as it was tighter fitting and she was still unconscious. Under the T-shirt she was wearing a simple white tank top. With the other items of clothing discarded, the true mess she was in could be revealed.

Blood had dribbled down her neck in web-like patterns. Pink stains weaved across her tank top in abstract forms. Trails of it had made their way down her chest, arms, neck, and torso. Blue and purple bruises dotted her arms randomly. Her appearance reminded me of Carrie in the movie *Carrie*, dripping in pig's blood. Her skin was still so pale and she was still so cold. I heard both Hopper and Joyce inhale sharply at the amount of blood accumulated on El's little body. I felt nauseous. I gripped her limp hand and squeezed it tight.

Lucas, Will, and Max returned, each carrying a stack of towels in various sizes. Lucas audibly gasped when he saw El. The other two stood there in complete shock. They weren't moving and I was getting annoyed. El needed help *right now*. We can't afford to stand around shocked anymore. I reached up and snatched the towels from Max and handed one to Hopper and Joyce. Hopper gave me a funny look I couldn't read. I dipped my cloth into the bowl, wrung it out, and stepped up to lean on the couch beside her. Hopper and Joyce shook out of whatever moment of shock they were having and dampened their towels as well.

I began to work on scrubbing the blood off her face. The two adults focused on cleaning El's arms and chest. I supported one side of her head with my left hand while my right held the towel. Gently I wiped the blood away from her nose. I rinsed my towel twice, the water

turning a dark pink, before her nose and surrounding area were sufficiently clear of blood. I hadn't been this close to her in so long. All the while I cleaned blood on her face, ears, and upper neck, I studied her features. Her eyes remained closed still and I begged them to open. Her skin was still pale and the bruise-like freckles still adorned her face. I noticed the changes that time had brought on though as well. In the 353 days she was gone, her cheekbones had become more prominent; she'd lost some of the childlike features she'd had. Her lashes were dark and brushed against her cheeks delicately. Her button nose and full lips were as beautiful and dainty as ever. And by God she had *hair*. How could someone be so close to death, covered in blood, and still be beautiful?

We three worked for another ten minutes cleaning her up. In that time, her breathing became less shallow and there was no new bleeding. I don't know where the rest of the Party and Max, or the older teens for that matter, has disappeared to, but I could hear quiet talking from down the hall.

Hopper stood up and I could hear his back crack. He let out a groan and shook the numbness out of his legs. "I'll go get her one of my sweaters and then we can figure out how to settle everything for the night," Joyce said standing as well. She and Hop walked down the hall and I heard more chatter and footsteps.

Dustin, Lucas, Max, Steve, Nancy, and Jonathan all appeared in the now cramped living room. They all took in El's unconscious form, yet much cleaner appearance. They stood back hesitantly, worry evident on their faces, afraid that any sudden movement could disturb the girl. I have El's hand a strong squeeze, and I stood up at last, my legs protesting. I must've been crouching for longer than I thought. I walked over to them and noticed Will wasn't with them.

"Where's Will at?"

Jonathan answered, "He's sleeping in my mom's room now. He couldn't stay up any longer."

I nodded in return. "I'm pretty positive she's gonna be okay guys. The bleeding stopped and hasn't started again. Her breathing is getting stronger too. We just don't know how long she is going to be out for,"

I explained to them all. Everyone let out a collective sigh of relief. And few *goods* and *phews* chorused as well. I turned to the Party and Max.

We all gave each other a few tired glances and understanding looks. No words spoken. None were necessary after the night we'd had. We all just knew we'd seen some shit. Terrible shit. And we hugged. Even Max. Even Nancy, Steve, and Jonathan joined. The adults were still in the back and we just kept hugging, relishing in the small comfort in brought.

4. Quiet

Quickly, I want to give a big thanks to those that have reviewed. I appreciate it immensely as it really let's me know what a reader is thinking as they read my story. This chapter is quite long, so be warned. I got carried away writing Joyce's motherlyness. :)

I hope you enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things

:

Joyce

"No, not this one," I rambled, shuffling through my drawers trying to find El something to wear. With the window missing the house was getting chilly. She need something to wear that wasn't covered in...she needed something to wear. I set my eyes upon my old, baby blue sweater I wore when I was pregnant with Will. *This'll work for now.* It would be way to big in her but it wasn't something I cared about getting ruined by...*blood.*

I grabbed the blue bundle and turned around. Hopper was standing in the doorway hands on his head. Light from the hallway broke through the gaps and gave a soft glow to the room. I had kept the lights off, for Will was finally asleep in my bed. I glanced at his sleeping form one last time before walking over to Hop.

"Here," I said handing the sweater to him, "it'll be too big but it will work for now."

"Thanks Joyce. I really appreciate all you've done. I...I know tonight has been, well, shitty," he smiled sadly. I have him a wobbly smile back. My eyes burned with new tears but I blinked them back. Without warning, he leaned down and wrapped his arms around me tightly. *Oh.* I have him a reassuring squeeze back and rubbed his back soothingly. I could hear him sniffing. My heart broke for him. How many heartbreaks can a person live through in one night? For both of us, really?

He straightened up and hastily rubbed at his eyes. He gave another small smile and walked down the hall. I followed behind him and what we came to see in the living room melted our hearts. Everyone and I mean *everyone* was wrapped in a big, group embrace in the middle of the room. Even Nancy, Steve, and Jonathan had joined in. It was a comforting sight. I walked up to Hopper and leaned against his side, taking in the relief that spread through the room. It was like taking in the first breath of spring air after being trapped in a long, gloomy winter. Steve was the first to notice us and began to loosen the group and then everyone had eventually broken the embrace.

"Hey Mike," Hop began, "will you help me with this?" He waved the sweater. Mike nodded and quickly made his way to him. He snatched the sweater and was at El's side immediately. Hop let out a huff and together they maneuvered El's upper body into the sweater. Everyone else, me included, just watched on in silence. They readjusted her head so she was still sitting up but in a more comfortable position. Mike caressed her face and Hop gave her shoulder a squeeze before they both turned to face us all again.

Mike walked back over to his group of friends and we all sort of stared at Hopper expectantly. He scanned all the kids tired, bruised, and utterly exhausted faces. I could feel his nerves burning at all the stares he was getting. He was always the one to give directions. I moved to his side of the room and clasped his hand reassuringly. He looked at me with red, tired eyes but a look of quiet determination spread across his features.

"Okay, so did you guys get the glass cleaned up?" He motioned towards Steve, Nancy, and Jonathan. They all gave a nod. "We took down all of Will's map too. We threw it in the trash," Jonathan mentioned. *That's my good boy.* He's always been my good

boy; always so helpful and considerate.

Dustin piped up. "I cleaned up your kitchen after the mess I made. I took the demodog from your fridge and double wrapped it in garbage bags outside. Steve helped me." Wait, *demodog? In my fridge?*

My jaw dropped in question and anger, but Hopper rested a hand on my shoulder. It clearly meant that now was not the time to be angry.

I took a breath.

A frigid breeze blew in from the missing window and the curtains snapped. We all jumped a bit at the sudden movement.

"Hey, do you have a tarp or something to cover that up with," Hop asked me. "Actually, I do." We used tarps to cover the lawn furniture in the winter.

"Steve, Jonathan, help me out will ya?" He asked. The two older boys nodded, and the three walked out back to find the tarp.

I rotated back to facing the group. They all looked so tired and were huddled close to each other. The trauma of the night and the last few days was really getting to them. *Oh God*. I couldn't separate them. It was late on a Saturday night. No school tomorrow. I could work it if they all stayed. The kids began whispering amongst themselves and Nancy stood off to the distance watching the boys outside. They had found the tarp and were attaching it to the empty window frame now.

I stumbled past the group of kids who had seated themselves on the floor, rehashing the events of the night in whispers. I reached Nancy and tapped her on the shoulder. She turned from the window and faced me. Her cheeks were dry but evidently tear-stained.

"Hey," I started softly, "I don't think I can separate them tonight. Not after all they've been through. I'm going to have them each call their parents to say they are sleeping over. You are welcome to stay to if you want."

"Thanks you Ms. Byers but I think it's best if I go home. Let's just say I've been gone a little *too* long."

I smiled understandingly. "Jonathan can take you and Steve both home when they're done fixing the window." She smiled and thanked me for the ride and for watching Mike. I turned back to look at the kids. Max was leaning heavily on Lucas' shoulder but was still awake. Mike was talking quietly to Dustin about the events of the lab. Both Lucas and Max were listening intently, her asking questions to clarify every so often. They were fully updating her on everything that had

gone down. Last year's events included. God these poor kids have experienced so much. Too much blood and violence; pain and fear.

The older boys and Hopper entered the house having sufficiently fixed the gaping hole. I smiled at them all in thanks. "Jonathan, honey, will you take Nancy and Steve home please. Oh and stop at Melvard's and pick up some food? I'm letting all the kids stay the night. I just can't bear to break them up." I walked to the kitchen and retrieved my wallet. I handed Jonathan a wad of cash. Thank God that Melvard's was open 24/7. "Sure thing mom," he said genuinely.

Oh, I was so happy that my boys were safe. I pulled him into tight hug and for once he didn't pull away out of embarrassment. I just held him close and breathed him in for a good minute before letting go. We parted and the three older teenagers walked out the door, but not before Nancy said good bye to Mike and they surprisingly all gave El a gentle clap on the shoulder or knee as thanks. El was still unconscious, or asleep, I didn't really know the difference.

"Hey guys, I want you to use the phone in my bedroom, take it in the hall, and tell your parents your staying over okay?" They nodded but didn't move.

Hopper faced me again. For reasons I didn't understand, guilt was written on his face.

"I *hate* to ask this but can El stay here for the night? I don't want to move her too much. She and I had a pretty bad fight and she kinda blew up all the windows at the cabin. I hate to put all this on you."

Now *that* had grabbed the attention of the Party. Max especially gaped up at what Hopper had said.

"She blew up all the windows in the *entire house*?" Her jaw nearly hit the floor. I realized she had only witnessed El's powers in person once. Hopper gave her a stiff nod. Dustin took the opportunity to excitedly tell Max about all the cool things they'd seen El do.

"Yes of course Hop. I don't want to move her more than we have too as well. She needs rest. Lots of it," I glanced at her battered figure, "and I noticed the missing windows too. Nice one." I smiled

humorously which he returned with a short chuckle. "Thank you. Thank you so much Joyce." A warm feeling spread across my chest.

"Since Will's in my bed, she can sleep in Will's room. The rest of the kids can sleep in the living room. We can manage with everyone here. I have a few sleeping bags in the closet and lots of extra blankets everywhere," I told him.

"Okay sounds good. How about we take her back then?" I nodded my head in agreement and we made our way over to the couch. She looked so delicate sitting there. My heart went out for this girl. She had been through so many terrible things and yet she remained so strong. I just felt...terribly sad for her. She didn't deserve a single ounce of grief that life had decided to throw upon her. She didn't deserve any of it.

Hop bent down at placed his hands underneath her knees and neck to support her. He picked her up with a small grunt and tossed her slightly to get her in a better position. For the first time that night, she let out a small sigh. It shocked me a little at the noise. She had made no sounds at all through this entire ordeal. Mike must be in tune to her because his head whipped around immediately. He recognized what Hop was doing and silently stood up and left his friends. They all looked up from their conversation as well but read the situation quickly. Hop glanced at Mike and after a moment gave him a nod to follow us. I let Mike go first and gave him a comforting pat on the shoulder as I followed the two. The rest of the kids stayed behind, watching silently.

Once in Will's room, Hopper set the poor girl down and began to fix the bed. Mike, ever the young gentlemen, went to take off El's shoes. I couldn't help but watch at the tenderness in which he used to take the shoes off her small feet. He unlaced them each and gently pulled each one off. He neatly laid them at the foot of the bed. He then went and removed the banadana from her wrist as well and too placed it near the shoes. I smiled softly.

I drew the curtains and Hopper tucked her into bed. Remembering how cold she felt, I found a spare woolen quilt from the back of Will's closet and covered her with that as well. She looked so tiny, the sheets looked as though they could swallow her whole. We all just

stared at this marvel of girl who'd once again saved our lives. Mike's eyes were watering again and he walked over to grasp her hand. Hop scrubbed at his face and pulled at his beard. I wrapped my hands around myself, thinking of the night's events. In the silence, I found myself reliving Bob's death. His screams of pain, the gruesome horror of it all, *the blood*.

And then I was ripped from those terrifying memories when I heard Jonathan re-enter the house. A mumbled chorus of *yeah!* and *food!* rang down the hallway. Hop looked up and broke out of the trance he was in. He bent down and gave a quick kiss to El's forehead and walked out of the room. I went to follow him but noticed Mike had not moved an inch. He seems frozen in place, still holding her hand and gazing at her face.

I slowly moved over to him. I understood how he felt. The helplessness at not being able to do anything when someone you care about is hurt or in pain is so, so hard. There wasn't anything he could do for her anymore. I recognized how much he wished he could take away all her pain and suffering. I knew that feeling all too well.

I placed a hand on his shoulder at he jumped at the touch. "Oh..." he rubbed at the silent tears running down his face. *Oh God kid I'm so sorry you have to go through this.* I gave him a small smile in the hopes of conveying some comfort.

"How about we go get some food now? How does that sound?" I asked gently. He gave me a watery smile, "Yeah, sure." He glanced back to El hesitantly.

"She's going to be okay you know. She's a fighter."

He looked back up at me, eyes shining with a soft determination. "Yeah, she's the best fighter we've got." I smiled again. I offered him my hand, "Let's go see what Jonathan brought back home, hmm?"

He bobbed his head and stood up. Still holding El's hand, he brought it to his lips before placing it back down beside her. My heart warmed at the sweet gesture. *He cares about her so much.*

I gave him a pat on the back and followed him out. I made sure to

leave Will's lamp on, it cast a soft glow around the room and the sleeping girl. In the kitchen, Jonathan was making grilled cheese on the stove. The kids were gathered around a bag of chips and a bag of carrots on the table. Mike went to join them, mumbling something to them I couldn't pick up. I moved over to Jonathan and questioned if he wanted any help.

"I'm okay over here, but there's some cans of tomato soup still in the bag." I smiled and pinched his cheek, "Has anyone ever told you you're the best?" He chuckled, "Love you too Mom." I smiled, and a content feeling washed over me. I grabbed a serving bowl and dumped the cans of soup in. I placed it in the microwave to warm up. In the meantime, I grabbed enough bowls and spoons for everyone and set them on the table. Just as the microwave beeped, Jonathan exclaimed, "Last one ready!" He flipped the final grilled cheese onto the impressive stack on the plate and walked over to the table. I grabbed a serving spoon and the hot bowl of soup and made my way to the table. Thankfully nothing spilled this time.

"Okay, bon appetit! Eat up everyone, you all must be starving," I ushered them. Turning around to grab a roll of paper towels, I spotted Hopper standing outside. *How did I not notice?* I set the paper towels on the table, and while they all were happily eating their *very* late dinner I walked outside.

It had only gotten chillier outside, what was he doing out here? I could see now that he was smoking a cigarette. "Hey whatcha doing out here?" I could see that he was visibly upset. He was leaning heavily on one of the posts.

"It's just...she reminds me so much...of Sara. How I couldn't help her." His voice was breaking and I saw tears streaming down his rough features. I felt my own tears beginning to form at this poor man's struggle. Add that to the growing number of heartbreaks this week. "I'm so...so, so sorry Hop," I rubbed soothing patterns across his lower back. He wrapped an arm around my shoulder and I leaned into the embrace. I could feel his whole body shaking, but his sobs remained inaudible. I hugged him back harder, trying to physically force as much comfort and love into him at once. We stood there for several minutes just soaking in the other's presence.

When his tears dried up he looked down at me and smiled. A quick one, but a smile nevertheless.

"Thanks again for everything."

"I'm more than happy to help. I've got everything handled here just fine," I told him, squeezing his arm reassuringly. "Good. That's...great. I'm gonna head over to the station then. I've got a cot there I can use. Tomorrow I'll be at the cabin to make it livable again," he said. "Are you sure? I bet we can find a place for you if you want?" I was worried about him. I'm positive he didn't want to be alone anymore than the rest of us.

"No, really it's okay Joyce. You don't have the space for me. I'll be fine. I need to be with my thoughts and some quiet for awhile. But you can bet your ass I'll be here first thing tomorrow morning," he stated. A small smile adorned his face that seemed to pronounce *I'll be okay*. "If you say so Hop."

He pulled me in for a tight hug. He smelled like cigarettes, sweat, and cheap cologne. I smiled into the hug, squeezing back hard to show him I would always be there for him. When we parted we both were glassy-eyed all over again.

"Be safe. I'll see you tomorrow first thing."

"You got it Chief," I chuckled. I felt all warm inside.

He gave me one last smile before putting his hat on and walked over to his truck. I watched him leave the driveway fully before going back inside. Stepping inside, I instantly could feel the temperature difference. The house was really warming back up after the window had been covered. The kids were still at the table and Jonathan was seated with them. They were finishing up the bag of chips and the last of their soup.

I padded over to my bedroom. Peeking in, I could see Will sleeping soundly. No twitching, sweating, mumbling, whimpering, or any other habits he had while possessed were present. A wave of relief washed over me and I gently shut the door. Once in the kitchen I poured myself a bowl of cereal and sat myself on the sofa. I could

hear quiet chatter continuously coming from the kitchen.

Munching away on my Frosted Flakes, I scanned the room. Nancy, Steve, and Jonathan had done a great job cleaning up the papers. I hadn't even noticed them while they were doing it. Then I saw the laundry basket of bloody towels sitting off to the side. I stopped chewing as a hard lump formed in my throat. It was so much...too much blood. All from little El. I breathed in hard through my nose willing myself not to throw up. I glanced down at my bowl when my stomach turned again. I was sitting right next to *it*. The red pool of blood where El's head laid less then two hours before stained the fabric *right next to* where I was sitting.

I quickly scooted away from *it*. I ate my bowl of cereal as quickly as possible refusing to glance at the stain. I simply stared straight forward. When I was done eating I went straight to the kitchen to put my dishes in the sink. I felt sick to my stomach. Leaning over the sink I took three deep breaths in through my nose and out through my mouth. Just like Hopper showed me. Recollecting myself, I turned to where everyone was seated. They were all staring with concerned faces.

"I'm okay guys. You guys go ahead and clean up your dishes okay. I'll start setting up the living room for you all to sleep in. Sound good?" I said.

"Yeah of course. Do you mind if I take a shower Ms. Byers?" Lucas asked. "Me too?" added Max and Mike.

"Sure. But..uh...we kinda used all the towels for.." I replied. The faces went pale at the realization.

"Oh...yeah. Well I don't mind really. I just want to rinse off. I can just air dry I guess," Lucas offered. Max and Mike nodded along with him.

"Yeah we can make that work. I have a fan that you can stand in front of if you want?"

"Perfect. Thanks Ms. Byers," Max answered.

"Thanks," both Mike and Lucas said at the same time.

"No problem," I smiled at them all. Lucas stacked his plate in the sink and went to the bathroom. The others stacked their plates as well. Jonathan and I picked up the crumbled paper towels and empty chip and carrot bags. Meanwhile, the rest of the kids went to find blankets. I heard the squeak of the shower running.

I proceeded to the living room and stripped the covering off the couch. Thankfully the blood hadn't soaked to the actual couch cushion. I shoved it in the basket with all the towels and briskly walked to the laundry room fully knowing the sad eyes watching me. I dumped the whole basket in the washer, filled it with soap, and a healthy cup of bleach. Turning the washing machine on I heard a startled yelp coming from the shower. *Shit. Lucas was in there.* I could hold back a laugh as I yelled, "Sorry! Just wait a minute! It'll change back!" I could hear a few giggles coming from the living room. That was a refreshing sound.

They had gathered quite the array of sleeping bags and blankets, and with Jonathan's help, they have created a fairly nice place to sleep. I patted my son on the shoulder, "Go get ready for bed sweetie." I could see the exhaustion in his eyes. He smiled greatly, kissed me on the cheek, and said goodnight to the kids. A string of *Goodnights* sounded back sleepily. Lucas appeared and Mike motioned for Max to go shower. She gave him a small smile and went to the bathroom.

"I'll check on you guys in a bit. Okay?" I asked them. Dustin and Lucas nodded while Mike

said, "Sure." I smiled at them, trying to give them some comfort. I let out a small sigh at seeing their battle-worn faces.

I took a breath and then walked back to my bedroom. Entering quietly, and seeing Will still sleeping, I grabbed some fresh, comfortable clothes and went into my bathroom. I changed and washed my face, and looking up I saw the digital clock behind me reading *2:30 am*. Jesus Christ it was late.

Refreshed, I went to check on the laundry and seeing that I was finished I tossed it the dryer. *I'll fold it tomorrow.*

As promised, I went to check on the Party. The lights had been

turned out except for one table lamp. Soft snores radiated from the pile on the floor. Seeing Max had returned I assumed Mike was in the shower but I didn't hear any water running. Walking down the hallway I still couldn't hear anything. I was about to knock on the bathroom door when I noticed the door to Will's room was open wider than before.

Padding to the open door, I glanced inside. What I saw stole my breath away.

Mike was seated on the floor asleep. El's hand must've slipped from the covers because he was holding her hand firmly. He was leaning on the side of the bed. Their heads were nearly touching. When I had thought Mike cared for Eleven earlier, I was wrong. *Mike loves her.*

5. Awake

My deepest apologies for the really late update. I've been visiting with the other side of my family this week and of course I devoted my time to them. Schoolwork has also come to the forefront and I have to put that before anything else. I hope you can understand. Thanks for all the support, reviews, favorites, and follows on this story! I never really imagined anyone would like it enough to keep reading but here we are. Thank you! Please leave a review if you want and enjoy!!

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things.

:

El

Everything was heavy. A fuzzy, prickly feeling enveloped my limbs. It was so dark. *It's so cold.* I didn't know where I was. All I could see was infinite blackness yet there was no sensation of walking on water. This wasn't the Void. And then everything came back in a stampeding rush.

I took an enormous breath and I could feel my heart beat again. I could feel the blood pounding in my veins, each beat sending a rush of throbbing pain. The torment subsided as oxygen entered my system fully. I could feel things now. I was laying down, something soft underneath me. I could move my fingers. Twitching them slightly, I could sense smooth sheets under my fingertips. I knew now that my eyes were closed. With all the strength I had, I peeled back my eyelids. I blinked several times before the world came into focus. I was in Will's room.

The previous night's events flashed through my memory. *The Gate.* I closed it. Relief flooded my system followed quickly by an aching pain.

My whole body trembled with agony. *Everything hurts.* I closed my eyes and scrunched up my face. I took a short breath in through my nose and out my mouth, willing myself not to throw up. I opened my

eyes again and made myself look around, moving only my head. Will's golden yellow walls stood out to me first. Bright sunlight peeked in through the gaps in the curtains. To my right, a single lamp remained on. The warm glow it gave off was comforting. The blue bedsheets I noticed next. There were smooth and soft. Not one wrinkle blemished the surface. I realized I must not have moved an inch while I was asleep. And then I looked to my left. *Mike.*

Even though I had seen him last night, and many times through the Void, it was still shocking. He was leaning against the side of the bed, sleeping peacefully. I smiled. My heart swelled, in a good way this time, and I couldn't be happier. He was here and he was safe. He was still in his clothes from last night. Dust and white spores covered his clothing. My heart wrenched at how he risked his life in the tunnels just to help me. But we are here now and we are safe. *He is safe.* A warm feeling spread over my aching bones.

I gazed at his sleeping form. His head leaned away from the rest of his body giving me a clear view of his face. Even though I could see him in the Void, being able to see him in the flesh was so different.

His midnight locks had grown longer. They just barely brushed the top of his brow now. The edges had begun to curl and I wanted to reach out to touch them. His face had matured immensely. His cheekbones and jaw were much more prominent. His beautiful freckles stood out wonderfully against his perfect, pale skin. He was perfect.

Despite the heavy ache in my bones and the sharp pain radiating around my skull, I tried to adjust myself to see him better. The movement was just enough to wake him. His gorgeous, inky eyes opened with a start. For a moment, his breath quickened and he frantically scanned the room. He was remembering last night.

"Mike."

And then he saw me. He gave me exactly the same look as when I walked through the door last night. A smile crept up on his face. Tears glistened in his eyes and I felt myself smile as well. *We were okay.* I tried to sit up but I couldn't keep the wince off my face. Everything just hurt so much.

"Hey, hey don't strain yourself," Mike rushed to my aid. He quickly snatched the pillow from the other side of the bed and gently placed it behind my back. I smiled at his kindness. I reached slowly to grab his hand and bring it to rest on my lap. He kneeled next the me, gripping my hand with both of his. I couldn't help the tears that sprung to my eyes.

He smiled again and brought my hand to his lips. He closed his eyes, savoring the quiet moment, and two lines of silent tears streamed down his face. I could feel my own tears hot against my cheeks. I smiled and sniffed. I was so happy. *Finally we are together.* He looked at me again. Worry crossed his features as he took in my appearance.

"How are you feeling?" he asked worriedly. I felt his grip tighten. I could lie to him to ease his mind, but friends don't lie.

"H..hurts." I hated how weak I sounded but it's true. I felt awful. More tears streamed down his cheeks and he looked concerned. "Where does it hurt?"

I grimaced at another wave of pain rocking my body. The tremors restarted. "E..everywhere," I could here him sniffle, "but mostly in my head, chest and throat." My voice was rough and muted from all the screaming. He brought his lips to my forehead and gave me a comforting kiss. It eased some of the pain for just a moment. He cradled my head with one hand and used his thumb to brush away my tears.

"I'm gonna help you feel better okay? I'm *never* losing you again. *Ever*," he told me. I leaned into his caress further. *He is so gentle.* I closed my eyes to try and fend off the next wave of pain. This time it left me gasping for breath. My vision blurred and I could here myself whimper. Mike had quickly made his way onto the bed and I was now pressed against his chest. I could feel his arms wrap around me protectively. The pain was so intense I could feel my entire body trembling. I could sense how much my pain hurt Mike and that just made me feel worse. I need to be strong for him. But not now.

He held me tight for who knows how long until the wave receded. "Oh God El, I'm sorry you have to go through this. You are the most amazing girl in the entire world and you are strong, so strong; the

best fighter," he whispered sweetly in my ear. His voice was deeper, I noticed, but thick with tears.

I smiled and dug myself further into his side. He was so warm and soft. "I'm never going to let you go. I am going to protect you. It's my turn now," he assured me. I gave him a small chuckle and I knew he was smiling too. I gripped him as hard as I could and looked up into his eyes. His cheeks were stained but there was a smile on his face. His gaze was tender. He kissed the top of my head. I weakly adjusted myself to a more comfortable position. I was leaning my head against his chest while his head rested against my hair. He moved the sheets to cover our lower halves from the brisk air and we just held each other. He is my lifeline and I'm never letting go.

We held each other for a long time. I don't know how long, but I never wanted it to end. He helped me through the pain and whispered sweet nothings in my ear. I snuggled close to him. Eventually, we could hear the stirrings of the household waking up. He gave me one last squeeze before asking, "Do you think you can stand up?"

I had never felt so weak before in my life. I hated it. I have Mike though and he can help me. "I can try," I answered softly. He gingerly sat me up on my own before standing off the bed. He carefully moved my aching legs off the mattress to the side of the bed. A wave of pain stole my breath for a moment. I squeezed my eyes shut. I could feel Mike kneel between my legs, hugging me. His hand cradled the back of my neck while the other rubbed soothing circles across my back. Finally the wave subsided enough for me to breathe again. My vision cleared and fresh tears leaked from my eyes. Mike released me and looked into my eyes with a watery smile.

He stood back up and I could take in his full height. He had grown a lot in the past year. Even though he towered over me I still thought of him as the same Mike who took me in from the rain, fed me Eggos, and gave me a name. "Okay, you ready?" he asked. I nodded hesitantly. My hands were placed on his shoulders while his were around my waist.

"1...2...3," I pushed with all my might to stand up. Mike's warm hands tightened around my waist and sent butterflies through my stomach.

My smile faltered though when my knees buckled and I started to fall. I was too weak to support myself. It was like every ounce of energy I had was ripped away by closing the Gate. I let out a small cry as I fell into Mike's arms.

"I've got you. I'm not gonna let you fall El," he moved my left arm to hang across his shoulders for support. His right arm gripped my waist firmly while my free hand gripped his shirt for dear life. I felt so helpless. "I'm sorry, Mike," I whispered. *Why did everything have to hurt so much?* "No! El you have nothing to be sorry for," Mike insisted. "Here, let's try and straighten your legs now. Can you do that?"

I breathed in through my nose and out through my mouth slowly, forcing the pain down. I nodded again.

He watched as I shakily moved my legs to a better standing position. I was nervous for some reason. I'd never felt like this before; I've never felt so *fragile*. I really, *really*, despised this feeling.

"There you go. You've got it. Now let's try walking," he expressed softly. "Okay." I was whispering now I was so exhausted. Slowly, I moved one foot in front of the other. I leaned heavily on Mike who was tilted to the side with my weight. Each step was excruciating. Red-hot agony pierced through my legs each time I brought one to the floor. I was breathing heavily. *Why did this hurt so much?*

Mike, ever the angel, kept his arms wrapped securely around me. We were in the hallway now.

"Let's take a break hmm?" He asked, concern sweeping through his voice. I looked at him with a grateful smile. I needed to catch my breath.

Down the hall I could hear the clatter of pans, bowls, and various silverware signaling the prepare of breakfast. Quiet voices echoed down the hall and surrounded me in a capsule of relief. *They were all safe*. Renewed motivation led me to take the first step this time. Getting over the surprise quickly, Mike supported me on my quest to see the rest of my friends. Stumbling meekly down the hall, the voices became clearer. I still couldn't make out exactly what they were saying though.

Watery sunlight filtered through the living room windows. The whole house was washed in a clear grey tone. There was a persistent chill in the air, yet the soft carpet warmed my bare toes. Mike kept glancing at me uneasily but I persevered. When we stepped into the kitchen everyone fell silent. All eyes were on me. Jonathan and Joyce were turned around busy at the stove. Max and Lucas were leaning against the countertop sipping juice. Dustin and Will were seated at the table. Everyone was staring.

"Jesus Christ. You look like shit," Dustin started. I glanced down self consciously. "Dude what the hell is wrong with you," Lucas went and smacked Dustin on the arm. He whined. I smiled at them both. Same old same old.

"We are really happy your back El," Lucas reassured me. Just then Joyce turned around, startling Jonathan.

"Oh honey you're awake! How are you feeling?" she implored sweetly. I smiled at her thoughtfulness, but a wave of pain rolled over the sweet moment. I screwed up my features and fell back into Mike.

A second pair of arms clasped over my open arm. I opened my eyes enough to see Joyce's worried face. Without talking, they ushered me to an open chair. I slumped into it with relief. I could feel myself let out a long sigh. She brushed my hair off my face and searched my eyes. "Oh sweetie...I'm so sorry," she paused, "Do you think you can eat something?" I bobbed my head in a yes.

I couldn't tell if the rumbling in my stomach was hunger or nausea. It could be both really. I hadn't eaten since Kali's. That was Friday afternoon and now it's Sunday morning. She rubbed my shoulder soothingly and went back to fixing breakfast. Jonathan gave me a grateful smile which I returned.

I craned my neck to see Mike pulling over a chair to sit next to me. He scooted his chair close and I leaned my head over on his shoulder. He was the only one who could take the edge off the pain.

Lucas had moved to sit at the table with us. Max remained at the counter. She looked stupefied. I felt a warm hand cover mine.

Looking up from Mike's shoulder I could see Will rubbing circles over my knuckles.

"Thank you. Thank you so much," he had tears in his eyes. "I don't think I have words to express..."

I removed my other hand from Mike's grasp and placed it over Will's. He looked up. His lip was trembling. "I understand," my voice was dim. I could feel my eyes watering as well. He gave me a smile before the dam broke open. He sobbed and sputtered *thank you* a million times. I smiled at him reassuringly, I could feel my own tears falling down my cheeks. Dustin moves to place an arm across Will's small shoulders. He leaned into him instinctively.

"We're here for you. Both of you," Dustin glanced between Will and I, "Party rules. Two of our members are in need of assistance..."

"It is our solemn duty to provide that assistance. Whatever it is," Lucas finished. He laid his hand atop Will's, who's hand was still gripping mine. Dustin and Mike followed as well. Something was missing. Max was still gazing longingly from the counter. I made eye contact with her; for a moment she looked scared. I felt shame ripple through me. Despite my previous jealousy, I motioned for her to join us.

For the first time, I saw the redhead smile as she jumped over to place her hand in the pile. We were all exchanging glances with each other. There wasn't a dry eye to be seen. The sense of friendship and comradely was overwhelming. Will's sobbing had reached its end and he began to hiccup. I giggled at the look of surprise on his face at the peculiar sound. Everyone sort of looked at me funny; big smiles adorned their faces. It dawned on me they had never really heard me laugh before. I felt my cheeks heat up. I smiled big at them, showing my teeth this time.

I looked up at Mike to see him staring at me with wonder. I felt butterfly's all over again. I leaned in closer to his face...

"Okay guys who's hungry!?" Jonathan's cheerful voice broke the tender moment.

"Holy shit man, I could eat a horse," Dustin replied.

"I'm starving!" both Max and Lucas exclaimed at the same time. Their eyes met and a blush crept up each of their faces. Dustin was practically drooling as Joyce and Jonathan set down dish after dish of breakfast food. A mountain of buttery toast lay next to several plates of eggs, bacon, sausage, and fruit.

The sheer volume of food was incredible.

"Thank you," I told Joyce and Jonathan as they sat down paper plates and silverware. "You are very welcome," Jonathan replied politely. Joyce ruffles my hair, "It's my pleasure sweetie." I smiled weakly at them both.

In the meantime, Dustin had created an impressive plate for himself. He was horfing down food like it was going to run away from him. Will and Max were much more mannered. Lucas on the other hand, challenged Dustin to see how many pieces of bacon they could eat in five minutes.

"You're on sucker," Dustin smirked.

"Good luck man. Don't want a repeat of the fifth grade picnic now do we?" Lucas grinned evilly. Dustin paled considerably while Max begged Lucas to explain. Will was munching along, listening intently. Joyce and Jonathan were standing at the counter chatting softly. I zoned out from the conversation. Mike shifted underneath me.

He smiled affectionately, which I returned, and helped me lean back over to my chair. I was hungry now. I tried to sit up and reach for a plate but my body protested. Mike placed a hand on my shoulder and gave me knowing look. He couldn't hide the worry that peeked through though.

"Just sit, I'll get you something." I looked at him gratefully. He grabbed a plate and put two pieces of toast on it, one spoonful of scrambled eggs, and a few strawberries. He then did the same with his own plate, except he gave himself a few strips of bacon. He placed the food in front of me before digging into his own. I grabbed his hand and squeezed as much gratitude into him as possible. I met

his dark eyes. He cheeks colored and he glanced back down at his food.

A smile lingering on my face, I nibbled on the toast. It tasted like heaven on earth, and once I knew my stomach could handle it, I went onto the second piece. After a few minutes though I could feel myself tiring. *Why is chewing so hard?* Each bite felt like too much work. My limbs felt impossibly heavy. I leaned back against the chair even though I was still hungry. I wanted to eat more but I was just so tired.

Mike caught on and quickly finished his own plate. Everyone was still caught up in their own conversations. He moved his chair as close as possible to mine and grabbed my plate and fork. I gave him a confused look. He forked some eggs and lifted them in front of my face. He was going to feed me. I felt my cheeks blaze red. *This is so embarrassing. I'm too weak to even feed myself.*

Mike seemed to read my mind and rested a hand on my knee. He offered me a small smile.

"C'mon, I know it's a bit embarrassing but you're hungry. You need to eat," warmth flooded from his dark eyes. He wanted to help me with all his heart. I couldn't reject those eyes; I reluctantly nodded. He grinned triumphantly and brought the fork gently to my lips. I chewed slowly, both savoring the eggs and because I didn't have the energy to chew any faster. Snickers from the boys reached my ears and I heard a *Shush!* from Max.

Without looking at them, Mike continued to feed me the eggs. I was painstakingly slow but he didn't seem to mind. "I'm done," I let Mike know before he grabbed more. My stomach couldn't take anymore food. "Full?" he asked. "Yes." With satisfaction evident on his features, he cleared our plates in the sink. Ours were the only two left. Joyce and Jonathan must've moved to the living room. Their voices were muffled now.

Will leaned on his arm, staring tiredly into space. Lucas was whispering something into Dustin's ear. They both snorted and Max bat them both over the ear. Max smiled at me sweetly as if apologizing for the boys' behavior. I smiled back tentatively. I would

have to get over this weird, jealous feeling at some point so it might as well be now.

Mike was done clearing the plates and was standing next to me now. "Hey let's move out to the living room. Dustin help me," he said. I reached up to grab his shoulders like before and he gently gripped my waist. I held him for a moment before Dustin grabbed my other side. I sagged between them both. *Why was this so hard?*

"There, there, I've gotcha," Dustin stayed.

"I not going to let you fall okay? Like before, let's take it one step at a time," Mike added. His voice was sweet and warmth bubbled up in my chest. I leaned my head against his shoulder as we slowly made our way to the couch. Upon seeing us, Joyce and Jonathan quickly stood up to make room. I gave them appreciative looks before Mike and Dustin set me down gingerly. Dustin smiled at me softly. Max and Lucas stood close behind him. I couldn't see Will anywhere. Mike sat down beside me.

With what little strength I had I pushed my upper half on his lap. I sighed at the return of contact. He really was the best pillow. I'm closed my eyes and smiled blissfully. I could feel his long fingers pulling through my unruly hair. It was an extremely soothing gesture. My eyelids felt heavy and the pain was subsiding now. I nestled deeper into him. A feeling of content spread through my limbs. *This is good.*

6. Peace?

Hey! I would greatly appreciate if you would leave me a review. I take in all positives and negatives/ constructive criticism. Thanks and I hope you enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things.

:

Mike

She is an angel. A badass angel. El's head rested against my lap. I felt the urge to run my fingers through her curls. It still amazes me that she has hair now, perfectly curly hair at that. Her chestnut locks brushed across the tips of her ears and spanned out against her forehead. The temptation grew too strong and I gave in. They're soft and delicate between my fingertips. I carefully began to brush the knots from her hair. I could feel her body relaxing further into mine.

When her breathing slowed to an even rise and fall, I knew she was asleep. I did not break the physical contact though and continued to stroke her hair in an effort to give her comfort.

I was miserable at the thought that sweet El was in so much pain. Sure I'd seen her worn out after using her abilities, but never like this. Closing the Gate brought her to a whole new level of exhaustion. I was surprised she managed to stay conscious at all during breakfast. She looked like she was a moment's notice away from passing out while picking at her toast. I knew well enough that she would not like my asking to help feed her, but I'm glad she accepted. She needed to eat and if she couldn't do it for herself then I would be there for her.

I looked up from her sleeping form to observe the living room. Will was curled up in a chair snoring softly. I felt sad and bit guilty. I had paid him next to no attention since his return from being the Spy. *He'll understand though right? He knows how much El means to me and that it doesn't change our friendship. Right?* I cleared those negative thoughts from my brain and continued to scan the room. Dustin was

sitting on the floor, leaning against the couch near El's feet. I could see how much he worries for her by his continuous wayward glances. He made eye contact with me and gave me a sad smile. He wiped at his eyes and straightened his hat. He attempted to clear his throat to sound tough, but I knew exactly what he was thinking. I knew Dustin cared for El a lot and he was fully mesmerized by her powers. He was concerned for her wellbeing. She did after all save our asses for the hundredth time.

Max and Lucas were sitting next to each other, squeezed together in the brown Lazy-Boy. She was leaning on his shoulder playing with his fingers, of which were placed in her lap. I felt shitty for treating her so bad. *I'm gonna need to apologize.* Lucas caught my gaze and his complexion darkened. I smirked and gave him a thumbs up. He rolled his eyes and snorted. Max gave him a look and he just played innocent. She smacked him on the shoulder and he feigned hurt. She giggled and they started taking quietly. *They are going to date aren't they?* I smiled.

El shifted in my lap and my full attention was devoted on her once more. She looked so small compared to me. Maybe it was the position she was laying, but she looked impossibly tiny. I've never seen her this way before. *She's so vulnerable.* She was always the strong one. The one who always sucked it up and toughed it out. She shouldn't have to do all the things that she's done. She shouldn't *have* to be so strong. It breaks my heart. El deserves a normal life with a normal house and normal friends. *The universe really has a way of rolling the dice.*

Then it occurred to me; if none of the terrible things had happened to us, I never would have met this beautiful girl. She's still be trapped in that God forsaken lab. Who knows, she might be dead in that hellish place if none of this shit happened. It's a bittersweet realization at best. *Can't have the good without a shitload of bad now can we?*

Ms. Byers walked into the living room and assessed us all with tired eyes. Her eyes were red and puffy. She kept sniffing into a damp tissue. *She's grieving.* I closed my eyes as the fresh pain of last night's horrid events resurfaced. I could still feel the fresh panic at the demodogs chasing us in the labs dim halls. I could taste the fear I felt for Will and just how awful I felt for him. I could hear Bob's screams

of agony ringing in my ears. When my eyes opened again, their were fresh tears rolling down my cheeks. I didn't sob. I didn't cry. I just let the tears fall silently. It was oddly tranquil: crying silently.

At last, Joyce moved over to check on Will. He was sleeping soundly curled up in the chair. I was surprised that he hasn't had any nightmares yet. At least none that made him physically lash out. It gripped my stomach that he could be suffering in silence. *I need to talk with him too.*

She brushed his hair off his forehead and cupped his cheek in a motherly way. She walked then to the middle of the room and looked around until she had all of our attention.

"Okay guys," she started, bringing her hands together, "I think it's best if we get all you guys home. It's Sunday so that means you have school tomorrow. And I know you don't want to go. *I don't want you to go.* But we have to avoid suspicion, especially with your parents. For now we have to pretend everything's normal." She waited until we all nodded in understanding.

She wiped at her face, "Trust that I know how...bullshit this week has been, but it's what we have to do. Max, honey, you can't tell your parents a word about what's happened. It's not safe for you or for them to know. I have a feeling the lab isn't done with us yet." Max nodded, "Yes, or course. I wouldn't dream of it."

Joyce bobbed her head, reassured. She continued, "Jonathan's taking a shower now, but he can drive you all home soon. Get some rest okay? I'm keeping Will home for at least a couple more days. I just can't...he needs to stay home and recover. You can come by later today and visit for a bit. Just stick together at school and talk to each other hmm?"

"Sure thing Ms. Byers and thanks for everything," Dustin smiled softly. "Yes thank you," Max said.

"Thanks, I hope Will feels better soon. I can bring him some comics later?" Lucas offered.

"That would be wonderful Lucas. Just stick together if you decide to

come over. I don't want anyone...alone," Joyce shuddered and smiled at the same time.

"Thank you so much Ms. Byers, but do you know when Hopper's supposed to be here?" I motioned to the sleeping girl in my lap.

She shook her head, "He was staying at his office last night. My guess is that either he's still sleeping or went right over to fix up the cabin and just forgot to call."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

Just then, Jonathan walked into the cramped living room. He had his jacket on and his hair was still damp. He gave us all a low-spirited smile.

"You guys ready to go?" he asked turing to grab his keys. A chain of *yes* and *yup* answered.

"Oh crap, I just need to find my backpack," Dustin started searching the living room. "Me too!" Lucas added. They soon moved into the kitchen to continue their search. Max went to go put on her shoes.

I gazed back at El. She was still sleeping, small tremors rippled through her every few seconds. Her face was scrunched up in pain; her button nose was wrinkled. I didn't want to leave her. I'd been away from her too long and now she was hurt. Fear gripped me in place. I was scared I was going to lose her. *Again*. I could feel my eyes watering. *God, I've cried so much these past two days*.

Two, salty blobs fell on El's cheek. I wiped them away gently but my fingers lingered on her cheek.

Joyce came and kneeled in front of me. She patted El's shoulder and looked into my watery eyes. She looked as crushed as I felt.

"Mike, I know it's hard but you should go home now. See your parents. Tell Nancy everything's okay," she was tearing up.

"B..but she *needs me*," I choked out. El needs me. I need her.

She placed at warm hand on my knee. "Oh honey, I know. I do. I

really do. But she is going to be just fine. She is going to sleep right here on this couch and Hopper is going to see her. She is going to be just fine okay?" she assured.

I nodded meekly. I have to be strong for El. As much as it hurts to leave I really should go home. I've barely been home all week with everything going on with Will. "Okay." My voice was all thick and croaky.

Joyce gave me one last pat before helping me remove El's head from my lap. She barely acknowledged the movement, whimpering only slightly at the adjustment.

"Everyone's outside and waiting okay?" she tried signaling it was time for me to leave without being rude. "Okay, just let me say goodbye."

"Of course," she glanced at Will and returned to the kitchen. I watched her pour a cup of coffee before kneeling back down in front of El.

Her cheek was puffed out against the couch cushion pushing out her lips. She was absolutely adorable. *Oh God, I don't want to leave.*

I pressed my lips against her forehead in a kiss. I kept my lips there firmly for a moment, trying to portray as much love and comfort as I could with one kiss. I slipped off my zip-up hoodie and placed it over her. I heard El sigh and I could see a faint smile adorn her face. She looked content at last.

I squeezed her shoulder and stood up. I wiped at my eyes for what seemed like the millionth time this morning. I said goodbye to Ms. Byers and stepped out the door.

The car was already started when I got in the back next to Dustin and Max.

"Jeesh what took ya so long?" Dustin whined. I was still wiping at my eyes when Max smacked him over the head.

"Hey what was that for!?"

"For being a douchebag, idiot. You really don't get it?"

Dustin looked confused and Max just groaned. Lucas snickered and Jonathan backed up and started to drive down the road.

I spent the rest of ride silent and pressed against the window. Watching the turning leaves roll by in a blur soothed my fried nerves. I couldn't stop thinking about El, but as one-by-one my friends were dropped off, my worry cooled down. As long as I kept telling myself she was alive and okay, then I was okay.

I waved goodbye to Jonathan and stepped inside. It was strange being in my own house again. The last day and a half dragged on a millennium and being in my own house was like a breath of fresh air. Here it was normal. Dad was asleep on the Lazy-Boy as usual. Holly was sitting in the living room playing with her dolls while the TV murmured about the weather. She smiled when she saw me. "Hi Mikey!"

I could've cried at her innocent smile. "Hi Holls," I waved back at her. She held up her dolls, "Barbies?"

"Sorry, not now okay. We can play later." She shrugged and went back to playing. For a moment I felt decades older, staring at a toddler who had not a care in the world.

"Mike is that you!?"

"Hey Mom," I replied. She was busy in the kitchen as usual. She was washing the dishes from breakfast even though it was edging 11:00.

"How was the sleepover?"

Here come the lies. "Oh it was okay. Not our best, Will got sick so he's staying home from school for a few days."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I hope he feels better soon."

"Yeah me too. I'm gonna visit him later and bring him some comics and games." I picked at my jeans. *I'm filthy.* I was kinda repulsed at how dirty I was. I should have just showered at the Byers.

Mom still hadn't turned around from the sink. "That's very nice of you Michael," I could sense her approval through tone of voice.

"Well...I'm gonna go upstairs then."

"Mmkay. I'll make lunch in a bit. Sandwiches okay?"

"Yeah, sure," I was already walking up the stairs.

When I reached my room, I let out a huge sigh. This was my safe place, other than the basement of course. It felt good to be surrounded by my blue walls, my bed, my *stuff*.

I was at my dresser grabbing a change of clothes when I heard a soft knock at my door. Nancy was standing in the doorway, a halfhearted smile on her face.

"Hey," I went back to searching for clothes.

"Hey...How is she?" Nancy sounded genuinely worried. I think she grew to like El as a sister in the short time she knew her.

"She's..better. She's in pain and I don't really know why, but she was able to stay awake for a little while. I got her to eat a little too."

"Good. That's good." Nancy leaned against the doorway. I bobbed my head.

She smiled at me and walked back to her room. I walked into the bathroom and turned on the shower. As the steam filled the room, I really took in my appearance. *Yuck*. My hair was all greasy and I just felt gross. Dust and spores covered my clothes and there was obvious dirt covering knuckles. A blunt line of brown showed where my clothes met my neck.

The warm water felt heavenly against my sore muscles. I scrubbed shampoo through my hair and lots of soap all over my body. I usually don't use a washcloth, but I felt that today was deserving of an extra deep clean. Stepping out of the shower, I felt very refreshed. I got dressed, brushed my teeth, ran a comb through my hair, and rushed downstairs. *I'm starving*.

Mom had made turkey sandwiches and lemonade for lunch. I scarfed down two before I even thought to breathe. Suddenly I felt very sleepy and decided that it was best to lay down for awhile. I walked

back upstairs and upon seeing my backpack I groaned. *I have homework.*

Cursing the universe at my misfortune, I slugged through math and an English worksheet. I finally laid down at 2:00 for a nap.

I was awoken abruptly by my walkie buzzing on my desk. I looked at the clock, 3:42. A warbled voice kept coming through. I wiped the sleep from my eyes before answering.

"Hello? It's Mike. Over."

"Mike!? Thank God. It's a Code Red." It was Will's voice coming through the comm.

"What? What's wrong?"

"It's El."

7. Relapse

Oh my gosh, I am so sorry for how late this chapter is. School has been kicking my ass. On the first day I already had homework of things we were never taught so that's great. I've had until chapter six of this sorry fairly planned out and it was here that I hit a road bump. A little writers block and a lot of school work has really dragged me down and I apologize. Thank you so incredibly much for all the support and your patience. I appreciate it all immensely. Leave a review and tell me what you think. Enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things

:

Will

I could feel the rough fabric of the chair scraping against my cheek. My eyes were closed, but my senses were returning to me as sleep began to wear off. I could hear soft footsteps and quiet voices, yet I couldn't determine what they were saying. It was warm and quiet in slumber, but I was waking up now. I opened my eyes and blinked at the brightness of the living room. The blinds were open and sunlight streamed in through the window. The tarp that covered the broken hole rustled gently with the breeze outside.

My eyelids felt heavy and I was still tired. I lazily glance around the room. My eyes reached the clock reading 2:00. *I should probably get up. I never sleep in this late. Now I'll never be able to sleep tonight.* I rubbed at my eyes forcing myself to get up. I sat up against the chair and took a deep breath. My bones felt heavy and all I wanted was to sleep again, but I resisted. Standing up, I stretch my arms up until I heard my back go *pop!* I couldn't help the yawn that escaped. The comforts of a good rest surrounded me as I looked around the quiet room.

Across from me lay El, sleeping. I could practically feel my heart go to mush. *She saved me. She saved all of us.* I smiled at her figure, her cheek was pressed against the cushion, puffing it out. She had this innocent, baby-like face as she slept.

I felt this indescribable tie between us. I've never had a crush on a girl, but I could tell it wasn't that. It was...like a bond. I've barely spoken to her, and I know right now I'd do anything for her happiness. I really wanted to talk to her. The guys played her out like some superhero, but she was more than that. She was a savior, my only hope in a dark hell. I had to resist the strong urge to just go over there and hug her to bits. *She needs rest.*

I smiled and walked into the kitchen. My stomach rumbled in protest and I searched for something to eat. Jonathan does most of the cooking and Mom says I'm not allowed to use the stove. I picked at my lip in thought. Cereal will have to do.

As I made my way through a bowl of corn flakes, Mom appeared from the hall. She looked to the chair where I was sitting, and with a sharp turn saw me in the kitchen. For a moment, I thought I saw panic in her eyes. She immediately relaxed upon seeing me. She gave me a watery smile before coming to sit next to me. She rubbed my shoulder as I finished eating. I pushed the bowl back and leaned against my chair. I looked to Mom and she had a funny look on her face.

"What, you're not going to drink the milk?" she asked knowingly. This was a running joke between us because she loved the after-cereal milk and I despised it. I screwed up my face and stuck out my tongue, "Yuck!"

She gave me a sideways hug, "That's my boy."

I pressed myself against her side, comforted in the familiar gesture.

"Hey, where's Jonathan?" I wondered aloud.

"He's just fiddling in his room. Hey, Jonathan! Come join us!" she called. "Mom, El's sleeping," I reminded her. "My bad...still?" she cast a worried glance at the living room when Jonathan walked into the kitchen.

"Whatcha guys doing?" he asked with a smile. He seemed to be walking on air, his smile nearly reached his ears. I bet Nancy had something to do with this. They were probably just on the phone.

"Cereal's for lunch," I told him. He ruffled my hair, which was annoying yet comforting at the same time. It was weird how normal things that used to be annoying or mundane became so meaningful. I hadn't felt this appreciative for so long. I feel like I've been in federal prison for the last decade, and I'm taking my first steps outside as a free person again. I feel like I can truly breath again.

Jonathan brought over the box of cornflakes and the gallon of milk. Mom went to grab two bowls and spoons. "How are you feeling now?" he asked softly. I could tell he was worried about me. As much as tried to be tougher then I am, I'm still his little brother.

"I'm still tired but I feel...good," I said finally. It was true though. I really did feel good, but maybe I was really feeling normal after feeling terrible for so long. Normalcy was the new best feeling to me.

He smiled, "Good enough to watch Poltergeist with me?" I perked up, "Definetly." I smiled at him again. *God, I haven't smiled in so long.* A wave of giddiness consumed me but quickly passed as Mom passed the cereal around.

We ended up finishing the box and Jonathan and I moved to the living room. I looked at El again. She was still dead to the world, but for some reason I thought she looked paler than before. Jonathan was setting up the VCR while I went to grab a blanket for El. I placed a thick quilt over her figure before setting myself down in a chair.

Satisfied that I had done something to help, I got comfy in the soft folds of the old fabric. This was mom's chair from college before she had to dropout. She had wanted to get rid of it a couple of years ago, but I had grown to love the worn out blue velvet and comforting smell. She eventually gave in with a knowing smile. Since then, it had become my unofficial seat in the living room. Since El was on the couch, Jonathan took over the Lazy-Boy.

I looked out to him and gave him an excited smile. This was my favorite movie, and despite all the jump scares, I could watch it all day long. He chuckled at my expression.

"This again?" Mom chuckled as she stood watching the beginning credits of the movie.

"What else?" Jonathan replied. We both beamed up at her innocently. She rubbed her temples like we would be the death of her. She succumbed to the puppy dog eyes and squished herself at the end of the couch near El's feet.

Five minutes after Carol Anne announces to her haunted family, "They're here," El begins to rustle around on the couch. All eyes snap to her like a rubber band being released. All three of us are silent as a mouse and don't move an inch. She had our full focus. She mumbled something incoherent and slowly blinked her eyes open.

She looked around the room groggily taking in her surroundings. Her movements were sluggish and her face quickly tightened up in discomfort. She tried to sit up, but a wave of dizziness must've of passed over her because she clutched at her forehead and screwed up her features.

"Hey, take it easy sweetie. You've been out for a little while," Mom cooed. El immediately relaxed into her touch. "How about we get you cleaned up. Hot shower sound good?" she asked. Without words, El nodded her head stiffly. I could feel that she was still in a lot of pain. As El gingerly sat up, both Jonathan and I made a move to help. I felt this peculiar brotherly protection towards her that I've never felt before. Mom waved her hand to have us sit back down. Still, I sat on the edge of my seat until El was standing. She was leaning heavily on Mom whom had her arms holding up the poor girl.

El's eyes met mine and they were unreadable. She was pale as a sheet and I took the time to take in her appearance. She was wearing a blue sweater I don't remember seeing and the same jeans from the previous night. Crusted blood still remained in bits of her hair and around her jaw and nose. The washcloth hadn't worked all the way. Her dark eye makeup was mostly rubbed off but smudges still surrounded her lids and under eye. Dirt and crud were dusted over various limbs. I could tell she just felt plain gross as she looked down at herself as well. She looked utterly exhausted, dark circles added to her already dark eyes. *And I thought I was tired.*

Jonathan stood and I sat on the edge of my seat, ready to assist at a moments notice, as we both watched El hobble off into the hallway. Once she was out of sight we both relaxed again. It was odd feeling

this protective towards someone I barely know. It was even stronger for Jonathan because he had always been the protector towards me. Now he has someone else to care for. *I have someone to look out for too.* I realize now that the situation has always been flipped; everyone's unfailingly looking out for me and protecting me. I guess I just fit into that sort of role. *But now it's my turn to take care of someone. To protect El.*

Jonathan patted the couch where he was now sitting and I went to sit with him. He gave me an odd look I couldn't read and then resumed the movie. He was tense and I could tell that something was on his mind. It was a few minutes later when he spoke up, "Do you remember what...we did...t..to you?" He was looking down in shame.

I gripped his hand firmly, "Well, sort of. I don't remember anything while I was unconscious. At the end, when...he had the most control," I gulped, "Everything was fuzzy like a dream. I can tell what's going on a little bit, but I can't remember any details. And no, I don't remember anything in the cabin. I only knew that I was there and something was happening." Tears were in his eyes and I gripped his hand harder. It wasn't the full truth, but it was a start.

Jonathan looked at me with a combination of sadness and relief in his eyes. I gave him a reassuring smile back. He suddenly pulled me into an embrace. I hugged him hard and sure, trying to show him that I was here. I closed my eyes to savor the moment.

Then I heard a scream and a crash.

I jumped and ice flooded my veins. Jonathan looked down the hall, "Mom?!"

He stumbled up from the couch and rushed down the hall. I was frozen all over again. Just hearing that scream, a scream of fear and terror, brought me back to that...*place.*

Somehow, I stood up and went down the hall. The bathroom door was open and filled with light. I felt like I was walking on glass. I don't even know what's going on yet and I'm terrified. *Just one scream.* I stood in the entrance. What lay before me was like that out of horror movie.

El was unconscious, laying naked on the tile floor. The shower curtain rod was ripped from its place as was the curtain. Bloody vomit was strewn about the toilet and surrounding floors. Water was everywhere, the shower was still on, and a choking steam filled the air. I could feel my heart beating rapidly and my breath coming in short gasps. Mom was standing in shock and moving numbly to cover El. Jonathan beat her to it and took off his own sweatshirt. He put it in Mom's shaking hands. It took her another second to fully realize what was going on. She snapped and hurried to put the clothing on El.

It was like I was stapled to the floor, I couldn't move an inch. *Frozen.* Jonathan hastily turned off the shower and the pounding sounds of water ceased to exist. Mom moved El's form onto her lap and that was when I noticed her face. Her ears and nose were bleeding again. She was wet and shivering. The blood streamed down her wet cheeks and mingled together on the floor. It was appallingly bright red against the cool, white tiles.

Jonathan was now crouching next to Mom and trying to shuffle her into his arms. His head was swinging over his shoulder. Her mouth hung open, it was like every ounce of life had vanished from her. He barreled through me, shoving me to the side of the door. Mom was still laying on the floor looking at all the watery blood stains. The steam had just elevated the metallic odor to a nauseating level.

As if she were a marionette doll, Mom stood up and awkwardly stumbled into the hall. I was still numb. She gripped my cheeks and looked me dead in the eye.

"Call Hopper."

I felt my self nod and she released me to rush back to her room. I could hear Jonathan talking to El's unconscious body; his way of coping. Darkness was creeping at the edges of my vision. *I'm gonna pass out.*

It was like a click in my brain that finally told me *move!* and I bolted to grab the phone in the kitchen. I fumbled to grab the phone while desperately searching the area for a phone number. I spotted a note on the fridge. I scrambled for it and nearly ripped the phone from the

cord in doing so. My heart was in my throat.

219-563-2940

My hand was shaking so bad I could barely dial the numbers.

Ring...Ring...Ring

"Chief Hopper with Hawkins Police, how can I be of assistance?" I swallowed a lump in my throat.

"It's Will...something," I choked on my words. Tears were building on my lashes.

"Will, tell me what's going on," he demanded gruffly.

"El...she...it got worse. Y..you need to get here fast."

Silence was my only answer. The dull ring that told me he had hung up. *Mike*. He needs to know. El needs Mike.

I dialed his number from memory and waited for an answer. Nothing.

I ran to my room with an idea. My SuperComm was ready and charged. I scrabbled to adjust it to the correct frequency. "Mike, do you copy? Over"

No answer.

"God dammit! Mike, do you copy? Over."

"Hello? It's Mike. Over."

"Mike!? Thank God. It's a Code Red," I urged.

"What? What's wrong?"

"It's El."

The buzz of radio waves replied. I could only assume that both him and Hopper were on their way.

The flood gates opened and I felt myself gasping for breath. I put my

hands over my mouth as my breath came in grating pants. I was becoming hysterical. I sobbed into my hands. I was basically shouting now, snot dripped from my nose and gummy salvia coated my mouth. This was a full blown panic attack.

El.

Her bloody face appeared before my eyes and I felt myself running toward her. My shoulders were shaking with sobs but I kept moving until I reached Mom's room.

She was splayed out across the bed. I'd never seen someone as pale as she was now. Fresh snow was her complexion. Blood was everywhere. It was just like earlier when she first was unconscious last night. It spilled over her lips and coated her front teeth in a horrid pink. Mom was rubbing the crown of El's head softly while Jonathan was pacing around the bathroom looking for towels.

"Where are the damn towels!?" Jonathan shouted. I jumped at the noise. I'd never heard him so angry, even with Dad. Mom mumbled something about the dryer and went back to comforting El. Quiet moans came unsteadily from El's lips. Her breath came in short pants.

Mom was desperately searching her face for any kind of answer. Her under eyes were smudged black from leftover mascara and tears. I placed both of my hands over El's left one, her skin was like ice.

I looked at her features and felt more tears well up. *Oh God, please don't let her die.* There is so much I want to tell her. How much I need to thank her for what she has sacrificed for us. I want to know her and be El's friend.

"*Fight* El. You have t...to keep fighting. Please w..we need you," I begged her. Still no answer.

Jonathan emerged from the doorway with a stack of towels and a jug of water. He plopped one into Mom's hands so she could deal with El's right side while he dealt with the left. I stepped back a bit but I kept my eyes trained on El's face.

I heard the front door slam open and heavy footsteps come down the

hall. I blankly looked back to see Hopper towering in the doorway. Sawdust covered his shoulders and he wasn't wearing his uniform. He must've been working on the cabin.

"No..oh...no no no," his deep voice was softened with fear. He didn't meet anyone's eyes. He walked straight to her side. Jonathan was pushed to the wayside as Hopper took his place. The Chief was mumbling something incoherent. I glanced at Jonathan who stared in blank horror. Blood covered his hands and had worked all the way up to his elbows. I felt myself panicking all over again.

Several minutes passed until I felt someone standing behind me. It was Mike.

8. Hospital

Hey everyone, I just need to put something out there so everyone is aware. I will not be able to update this story as quickly as I would like too. The last chapter took me over a week to write simply because I don't have the time. I know where I want this story to go and how I want it to end. I'm just struggling with managing time. I have to put school before this. I was planning on writing a few chapters this past Labor Day weekend but my teachers decided to be assholes, I got sick, and my entire family decided to come over. I'm eternally grateful for all of your patience and I hope you can understand. It is not for my lack of trying. I want to give an extra special thank you to CaptainRex12 and noDownSide for reviewing since the start. Thank you! I appreciate everyone who leaves a comment, a review, favorite, or follow. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Enjoy!

:

Mike

The crunch of the gravel and my racing heart were the only sounds I registered as I pulled into the Byers' driveway. *I need to get to her.*

The door was hanging open like a slack jaw. I stumbled up the porch and raced into the house. Taking in my surroundings, everything was normal.

Boom..Boom..Boom

A voice from the back of the house echoed through the hallway: Hopper's voice. I hadn't even noticed his truck outside. The driver's door wasn't even closed all the way.

Walking through the hall was like trudging through molasses. Every step felt heavy and a spike of dread would shoot through me each time my foot made contact with the floor. I felt like I was swimming. The lights were off, but clear sunlight from the windows brightened the hall enough to see. I could hear the voices louder now. Hopper kept mumbling *no*. I passed the bathroom. The whiteness of the room

was a harsh contrast to the earthy shades of the rest of the house. Something caught my eye and I took a glance inside.

I gagged. Blood was smeared along the floor. *El's blood*. Puddles of water scattered the room and were mixing with the crimson. Vomit covered the open toilet. It too was stained red. A wave of hot, steamy air brushed against my face. It reeked of blood and fear. I was sweating through my shirt.

The voices pulled me from the horror and I continued silently down the hall. I was breathing fast and hard. Each heartbeat felt like a sledgehammer to the chest. I could see Will through the crack in Ms. Byers' open bedroom door. He was standing stock still. I slowly pushed the door open to it's full extent.

The sight before me robbed me of every breath and movement.

El lay on the bed covered in blood. Her legs were bare and she was wearing a damp, grey sweatshirt.

A pillow behind her shoulders made her head swing back at a severe arch. Her mouth was open and her teeth were stained pink. Gore covered her nose and lips and a smear of it was covering her ears. It even was smudged all the way up her temples. She was pale and her fingertips looked blue. She looked dead.

Hopper, Joyce, and Jonathan were crowded around her and I was struck how familiar it looked to being in a hospital. Doctors rushing around a patient trying to force life back into a dying girl. My knees buckled and I collapsed onto the floor. I couldn't breathe. My mouth was opening and closing like a gaping fish. A sound I'd never even knew I was capable of escaped from my throat. It was guttural, and raw, and anguished.

All eyes were on me, I saw Joyce clutch her mouth, but I wasn't focused on them. Tears stung my eyes, they were boiling. My whole body felt numb and all I could feel were those hot tears. Hopper stood and began asking Joyce what happened.

"I...I don't know, she just," she was gasping between her sobs. "She was going to take a shower so..I..I helped her get ready a..and then

left. The w..water was on so I went t..to check on her. The curtain rod was broken and sh..she was on the fl..floor."

Hopper placed both his hands on his face and dragged them down slowly, pulling at his loose skin.

I stopped listening to them and crawled over to El. I couldn't even stand, the pain I felt for her was unbearable. I was kneeling next to the side of the bed much like I had last night. I gripped her hand and pulled it up to my face. The veins were bright blue and prominent along her wrist. Her fingers were like ice cubes. My tears formed small rivulets across her knuckles.

I stared at her chest for who knows how long until I could decipher the nearly undistinguishable rise and fall. She was still alive. *I can't lose you.* I pressed my lips against her knuckles. I didn't know if the gesture was for my comfort or hers. Her hair was wet, a rich chocolate I'd never seen her wear before. It curled around her ears and forehead like ribbons. Her hair was the only part of her that was okay. I focused on those curls. I couldn't stand to see this wash of death that had overtaken her. I felt like I was choking, I must've cried an entire ocean at this point.

She was shivering and small whimpers came from her lips. Each cry of pain sent a spear through my heart, shattering it into a million jagged pieces. I bit my lip to contain another sob and gathered her in my arms. I just needed to hold her. I nestled her head in the crook of my shoulder and supported her neck with my palm. My chin rested on her damp curls. I held her as close to my body as possible. I was trembling now. From what I don't know. Exhaustion? Worry? Fear? Panic?

I couldn't contain the sob ripping through my throat, and with each heave of tears I gripped El's limp form closer. *I'm not ever letting you go.* I was falling to pieces. I was crying and whimpering into her hair. She was my focal point, my rock in those torturous 353 days. *I want her. I need her so bad.*

Tender fingers wrapped around my shoulder, I didn't even have to look, I knew it was him: Will. He understood this feeling. Hell, he knew better than anyone what real pain felt like. *El does too.* I leaned

into his touch of comfort, drawing whatever small amount of hope from it I could.

El started moving beneath me. Her legs and arms were trembling. My eyes bulged, *she's waking up*. I drew back from my embrace enough to study her face. Her eyes were closed. She kept moving more and more; sharply increasing until her muscles were spasming out of control. *She's seizing*. Her joints locked severely and her head was thrown all the way back. Her whole body was shaking violently. I could see the whites of her eyes. And my God, the noises that she was making were straight out of a horror film; panting breaths tied with short, painful moans.

I'd never been so scared in my entire life.

"Get her on her side!"

I tried to move but I couldn't, my brain wasn't operating with my limbs. I could only watch in agonizing silence as Hopper and Jonathan rushed to put El on her side. Joyce grabbed El's head and placed a pillow directly underneath. A hand pulled me back and I wasn't able to resist. My hands finally moved to cover my mouth in shock. I felt my eyes bulging out of my head, scalding tears cascading down my cheeks. Will let out a cry of fear.

Jonathan stepped back, his features were blank yet full of shock. Hopper and Joyce hovered over El, not touching her directly. Hopper had regained a bit of that laser focus I was familiar with. I could see it in his eyes. On the other hand, Joyce was a sniveling mess much like myself. We were falling apart.

El was still shaking. Her head was banging back and forth into the pillow. It reminded me so clearly of how Will had been seizing in pain on the field only a few days ago. Black edged my field of vision. I couldn't tell if I was even breathing at this point.

And then the bubble broke and I could move again. I felt drawn to her by an invisible force. I was inching slowly to her shuddering body. The rest of my body felt cold while the tears on my cheeks felt like fire. My eyes felt as though they would pop out of their sockets. I was choking for air between the sobs and snot that thickened my

throat.

Each jerk of her fragile body sent a wave of pain through my heart. My hand hovered above her shoulder. Hopper was whispering something incoherent but distinctly encouraging to her. I could make out the shine of fresh blood under her nose.

I was scared to touch her; it was a completely foreign feeling to me. I'd never feared El in the time I've known her, but I was scared now. Of what? I don't exactly know. Hurting her? Me? The endless scenarios running through my head, all of which end in pain and misery?

I hesitantly lowered my fingers to her shoulder. I withhold a cry and played my fingers out. My arm followed her jerking for a moment. And then it all stopped. Her shaking was over. She was silent. I was terrified all over again. The seizure was over but was she still alive?

I wait as Hopper places two fingers on her neck and paused for several seconds. *He's feeling for a pulse.*

He let out a breath, "Sh..she's alive." A wave crashed through my heart, full of relief and fear of what was to come. *What do we do now?*

Hopper stood back up and placed his hands on his hips. His eyes burned holes through the floor as his thoughts tumbled around. Everyone was staring at him, ready for him to speak, except me. I had moved my eyes back on El. She was extremely pale, a shocking shade one can't help but look at. The circles under her eyes were deepening with gummed up mascara and bruises. Red blood stood out harshly against the whiteness of her flesh. I looked down at the sheets as a wave of shame passed over me. *I can't protect her from the pain.*

I grabbed her hand and pulled her fingers to my lips. A slight twitch of her thumb pulled my eyes from the bedside to her face. *Closed eyes.*

"What do we do?" Jonathan couldn't stand the silence any longer. Will have him a stern look.

Hopper lifted his eyes from the floor to the ceiling and rubbed his beard in thought. "Hospitals are *absolutely* out of the option. Those bastard are still out there, not even close to being locked up."

Joyce spoke up softly. "Jim, she needs a doctor."

"Yeah I know," he said tiredly. He pressed his palms against his eyes tightly.

I held El's fingers against my cheek, still waiting for Hopper to come up with something. He was the one who had the most knowledge of the lab and what they know about us. He has to deem what's safe for El. I blinked away more tears. Will came up next to Jonathan and leaned on him for support. His eyes were glossy and bloodshot.

A sharp intake of breath moved all of our eyes to Hopper's face. I could see the formation of an idea building on his grizzled face.

"I think I know what we can do."

"What? What is it?" I demanded. He looked me in the eye, "Dr. Owens."

Joyce and Jonathan were giving her confused looks as the gears began to turn in my head. *Dr. Owens.*

The confused faces staring up at him led him to an explanation. "Late last night I went back to the lab to get him and take him to the hospital. Told the doctors he was mauled by a dog, and he's still there. But, I remember him telling me about a private office he has out of town. He's the only one we can trust." Hope flickered in my stomach.

"Will there be a doctor there?" Joyce asked. "And where is it?"

"I need your phone." Hopper was already making his way through the dials on the telephone before Joyce could reply.

My heart was pounding faster, but now each beat gave a thrum of hope. *Please let this work.*

"Dr. Owens? Yes. It's Hopper. We need your help...Yes...It's El...She's

gotten worse than what you saw and she's had a seizure...No...yes...uh Stony Brook Plaza," Jonathan raced out of the room to grab something to write on, "Yes okay...time them ...got it...Will somebody be there?...Okay see you there."

Hopper looked up, "So the plan is that we need to get her to his office in Stony Brook Plaza. He rents a medical office there, 55708. He says he has everything. He's sending his assistant now and he will be checking out of the hospital now. We need to time the...next time she...has..a..a seizure."

I nodded my head and tears that hadn't fallen from my lids dripped down my cheeks. These ones were cold. Joyce was nodding along as Hopper continued talking to her. I glanced behind me to see Will skimming through the address book. I didn't even notice he had left the room to grab it. Jonathan was scribbling notes down furiously. I finally realized he was only wearing his undershirt, the sweatshirt El's wearing must be his.

"Found it!" Hopper and Joyce went to go examine the address Will was presenting them. I turned back to El. She looked so tired, even in unconsciousness exhaustion settled over her like dust. *God, I just want her to be better.* I squeezed her fingers tight and gave them a quick kiss before brushing the curls off her forehead again.

Hopper came around me and I stepped back as he went to cradle El in his arms. She was so limp and motionless it frightened me. Her mouth was parted, exaggerating her poor state and the blood crusted under her nose. He stumbled under her weight which kind of surprised me. Last night, she was light as a feather, though it could be in part to the massive amounts of adrenaline I was feeling.

"Follows us boys," Joyce motioned as she quickly followed Hopper out of the room.

I was directly behind her, watching El's head in case it bumped into anything. Will and Jonathan were directly behind me.

"We're taking my car. I can speed," Hopper declared with no arguments.

I walked ahead and opened the driver door and the back door. I climbed in and waited as Hopper adjusted El in his arms. He gingerly leaned in to place her on my lap. I stretched my arms to pull her inside the vehicle. She was fully sitting on top of me now, her back against my chest and her butt on my lap. Any other time I would have been

tomatoe-faced, but now my anxiety held me in check. I adjusted her so she was more comfortable as everyone else climbed in.

Hopper revved the engine and we were speeding down the driveway. Joyce turned over from the passenger's seat. She looked at El nervously, "Will, you still have the adresss book?"

He shuffled the book into her outstretched hands. Her and Hopper began discussing the address and the quickest way to get there. We lurched to a stop at an intersection, but before I could even blink we were speeding along down Mirkwood.

El was mumbling something incoherent. Her eyes were closed, but her lips were moving softly. Her blood now covered my fingers and I was leaving prints everywhere. I'd never been this stressed before, holding her frail body against mine.

I was squished between Will on my right and Jonathan on my left. Jonathan was staring out the window, he had to find some way to escape his surroundings. Will was clutching El's fingers loosely, but he was burning holes into the back of the passenger's seat with his stare.

El started twitching again and the same excruciating moans spilled from her throat. I bit my lip to hold back a choking sob. *Not again.*

"Time it!" Hopper yelled. I could see his icy eyes from the rearview mirror.

Will and I rushed to get her leaning more to the side to keep her airways clear. Jonathan fumbled for his watch. Now her head was placed on its side against my lap, her legs were folded on Will's. She was jerking back against my chest, her legs kicking Will in the ribs. I held her tight against me. I didn't want her to hurt herself anymore

than she already has.

It was absolutely terrifying seeing someone you care about go through a seizure. Dustin's cousin has epilepsy and he's only seen him seize up once at a family reunion. He had told me it was some of the scariest shit he'd ever seen. Her nose was bleeding again, the red layering upon the coagulated gunk underneath. Tears burned in my eyes, I bit my lip so hard I swore I could taste blood. Shadows dashed across her bloody face as we sped through down town.

Slowly, she came off the seizure. The shaking and jerking stopped, but she was breathing very shallowly. I couldn't hold back my sob any longer. I pulled her up against me and wept into her neck. I held her in a death grip, *I'm never leaving you.*

"3:28," Jonathan said softly.

The entire drive was filled with sharp turns and screeching wheels. Hopper's fingers hovered above his sirens button the entire time.

Finally, after what felt like years instead of minutes, we pulled into the plaza housing Dr. Owens' office. Before Hopper even swung into a parking spot, I was unbuckling myself and scooping El fully into my arms. The two adults scrambled out of the car. Joyce rushed into the plain, brick building to notify whoever was there, that we were here. Hopper and Jonathan came over to the side of the vehicle. Will got out and held his arms open as I carefully moved out of the car.

Gingerly, I slipped out, everyone's arms open and ready to catch us. I readjusted El so she was more secure. It's strange, the only time I ever held a girl like this, the bridal-style in which you're supposed to cross the threshold into married life, I'm holding a bleeding, fading girl whom I would give the world to in a heartbeat. All eyes were on me as I walked up to the door. Will hastened to open the door for us all, I grunted him a quick *thanks* and walked inside. A small, very mundane lobby greeted us.

The walls were a pale shade of grey; an old, red haired lady was sitting at the front desk. There were a few chairs sitting by the window. A few posters picturing human anatomy and one about brain health hung on one wall. A single door left the assumption of a

continuation in the building. The room looked completely ordinary, and rather boring. A perfect coverup for a high grade medical office that's part of a top secret laboratory that experiments on innocent children.

The lady looked up from her sewing and stared at us through narrow eyes. Her nose was pinched and her permanent frown was exaggerated by her sagging wrinkles. She took in our rumpled forms and then moved her eyes to El. She observed the bloody, unconscious girl laying in a frantic boys arms and said calmly, "Dr. Owens is waiting for you."

Hopper was the first to get to the door. He held it open until I had stumbled inside and then left it for Jonathan to open for everyone else. A short, narrow hallway greeted us; El's bare feet brushed the wall it was so small. We followed it back until we were met with another simple door. This one was protected with a complicated key pad, but the light on it shown green. After a moments hesitation, Hopper opened the door. It swung into a surprisingly large room for how small the hallway was.

The walls and floor were stark white and blindingly bright. Medical contraptions filled the space along the walls. Cabinets filled with everything from gauze to suspicious looking viles of drugs covered one wall entirely. A single bed lay off to the side. My stomach lurched upon seeing the restraints attached to the bed frame. In the middle of it all sat Dr. Owens. His injured leg stuck straight out from his seated postion. A pair of crutches were clasped in his hands. A young man with blonde hair was preparing an IV bag when he saw us. He paled considerably.

"Place her on the table," Dr. Owens ordered. His voice broke us out of our stillness. I walked to the table and Hopper helped me set her on the paper covering. Her head lolled to the side. We didn't need *hellos* in a time like this.

"Clean her of as much blood as you can. Has she had another seizure?"

Joyce reached for the towels handed to her by the blonde assistant. "Yeah, on the way over here. Three minutes, twenty-eight seconds,"

Jonathan answered. He and Will were standing close to the door. Will looked traumatized and was clinging to Jonathan's arm. He was having a flashback. I could see it in his eyes.

"Marcus, prepare the MRI," Dr. Owens shooed his assistant, Marcus apparently, to the door on the right wall.

Joyce and Hopper were scrubbing furiously at the red crusted around El's ears. I grabbed a towel and took a much gentler approach to her face. With a tender touch, I wiped the blood from her face. After a second towel, her face was clear of the blood and the dirt that lingered. Her cheeks held a deathlike pallor, yet soft, steady breaths rose and fell with her chest. She was like sleeping beauty, I wanted so badly to kiss her lips and gift back to her the life she deserves.

"Joyce, I need you to change her into this,"

Dr. Owens was leaning on a counter. A hospital gown sat folded in his palm. She nodded and began to pull El's arms from the sweatshirt. I turned around out of instinct as did Will and Jonathan. Hopper grabbed the gown from Dr. Owens and went to help Joyce.

I was staring at the back of Will's head. The silence cut through me like a hot knife through butter. It consumed me until all I could hear was the throbbing of my heart and the tears building in my eyes. I could feel myself verging on panic once again. *She is going to be okay*, I told myself. She has doctors now, real medical attention.

She has to be.

"Jim, I need you to take her back and place her in the bed of the MRI machine. Marcus can assist you from there." Hopper complied, and picked up El, mumbling soothing words of comfort to her.

Dr. Owens spun around in his chair to face the rest of us. "I'm going to need you all the wait in the lobby with Ms. Janet. I need space to work, and well...we don't have any...assurances at the moment."

"The hell I am," I replied angrily. I'm not leaving El.

"Michael, I need you to understand," he replied tensely.

"Like shit I'm leaving her. Not a chance," hot tears burned in my eyes.

"Mike."

It was Will, he was giving me a stern look I rarely see him wear. He never gets annoyed with anyone, but I could hear the meaning behind his words. He looked exhausted.

I pressed my lips into a thin line and hung my head down. I was a bit ashamed for disrespecting

Dr. Owens, but when it comes to El, it's like I lose all control of my impulses. I balled my hands into fists and nodded my head stiffly. I couldn't look anyone in the eye as we left the room and walked back down the hall. Only seconds later, Hopper joined us in the lobby. There were enough chairs for all of us, but I took to pacing the floor instead.

Hopper spoke up, "They're going to put her through the MRI to get an image of her brain. They are looking for bleeding or swelling. Dr. Owens is trying to see if she'll need...*surgery*."

My heart skipped a beat at the thought of El needing brain surgery. Hopper placed his face in his hands and I realized he must be thinking of Sara. The idea of that hit me like a bullet to the chest.

I paced the floor for what seemed like hours. Janet tried to offer us cookies, but we all refused. She seemed quite annoyed at our dismissal and she resumed her sewing quietly.

At long last the door opened and Marcus walked through.

"She's awake. You can come see her now."

My heart soared and I sprinted to the door not caring about the others. I could hear Hopper, Joyce, and Marcus discussing the medication El was on. Something about AEDs and other medical jargon, but I didn't care. *El is awake*.

I swung open the door to the medical room and there she was. She was propped up on the bed with pillows, a blanket was draped across her lap. She smiled at me and it was like a thousand stars shown

down on me. I raced to her and gathered her in my arms. I just needed to feel her presence.

"*Mike*," her voice was like an angels. Soft and infinitely sweet.

"Hey El," I breathed her in. I smiled into her hair before taking in her face. Her caramel eyes shown up at me and she actually had a rosy tint back to her cheeks.

"I promised I wouldn't leave you."

9. Doctor

Hey everyone! Sorry for this chapter being so late. My life has been nothing short of hectic. I'm starting to wrap this story up now. Things will be calming down, for the most part. I've written a lot of tense, drama filled scenes and now I want to ease into the end of this story with a few more chapters. Between 3-5 chapters probably. Oh, and by the way, absolutely nothing is medically accurate. Like at all. I made up literally everything. Thank you to every single one of you that has read this story! Leave a review and tell me what you think! Thanks and enjoy!

:

El

Everything was dark, *again*, but I could tell this time the reason was because my eyes were closed. I could feel my heart beating. A constant throbbing pulsed through my limbs. I felt incredibly heavy, a drugged sensation almost. My mouth tasted *horrible*. Like blood and vomit, but my tongue was strangely dry.

My muscles were stiff and sore, like I'd exercised for too long. A ringing in my ears was beginning to clear up to actual sounds. A man's voice was speaking in a monotone whisper. It was a voice I recognized.

As if I was lifting a house off my eyelids, they finally peeled back. A blinding light greeted me, and searing pain forced my eyes to close against it. I blinked several times, the pain lessening as my pupils adjusted to the light. A single medical-grade lightbulb hung from a white, empty ceiling. In fact, the entire room was achingly, painfully white. *I know this emptiness too well. This is too much like the lab.*

I craned my neck forward, a painful twinge streaked up the back of my skull. *Where am I?* Panic was twitching at my fingertips. The last thing I could remember was getting in the shower at the Byers'. The overwhelming agony that struck me like an ax through wood, and then...nothing. The gap in my memory felt like a black hole sucking me in, *what happened?*

I stretched my neck a little further until I could see two men in doctors' scrubs. My nerves were on fire, where were these bad men? Had they found me while I was unconscious? Where's Mike? Where were Hopper and Joyce?

My breathing was becoming short and quick as I verged on hyperventilating. *What is going on?* Tears of fear pricked my eyes; I always cried when I was scared. One of the men must've heard my breakdown finally, and he turned in his seat to face me.

He appeared to be studying me with a calculating stare.

I knew his face. The wrinkled cheeks, thick grey hair, the crutches that lay loosely in his grip: *Dr. Owens*. The blonde man leaning close to him looked up as well. I didn't recognize him, but something about his face and the corners of his mouth reminded me sharply of Dr. Owens. My panic didn't settle at the sight of them though. Trust was hard to come by through me; seeing him not shoot me in the lab was nowhere near enough for me not to be afraid.

What the hell am I doing here?

I started to sit up, but something was biting at my wrist pulling me back. Confused, I looked down and my heart skipped a beat at the sight of the leather restraints holding me back. *No, not again*. I was frantically pulling on them, I was becoming hysterical. *What is going on?*

"Eleven."

His voice brought me down from my hysteria just a notch. I slowly turned to face him, my chest heaving with fearful, panicked breathes. I glared at him, hoping that even though I was drained, he would still believe I had my abilities at maximum power.

The blonde man was standing in a defensive position edging in front of Dr. Owens. From behind him, the old man spoke up, "Eleven, I need you to calm down. You are safe here. What is the last thing you remember?"

His voice was steady and soft all at the same time. He sounded like

every doctor should, eerily comforting yet firm. I didn't answer him. There wasn't any trust between us, and so far, I wasn't being forced to answer like with Papa. *I only talk when I have too, with people like them at least.* I'd grown up scarcely speaking a word. I was raised to follow orders, not speak. It was a lesson I had a hard time removing myself from. To me there was still a small sense of comfort in my silence. Now instead of a punishment by Papa, silence was a control move on my part.

I continued to glare at him. His face dropped and he mumbled something to the blonde man. The young doctor relaxed his posture slightly and stepped to the side.

Dr. Owens gazed at me curiously before speaking, "Do you remember when we were at the lab, Jim fixed me up and you went to deal with business?" He paused, presumably waiting for my answer, but my silence was the only reply.

He realized that I wasn't going to speak and continued on, "Well, he came back for me and took me to the hospital to get my leg fixed up. He's a good man, that Jim." He kept waving his hands around as he spoke. He glanced at me with careful eyes.

"I'm the doctor that took over the laboratory after...you know who." My stomach knotted in a painful twist.

"But I'm also the same guy who has been looking after Will. He would come see me to talk about his time in the Upside Down. I was putting all my effort into helping that boy, you know?" Dr. Owens was trying to win me over, just a little.

The blonde man cast him a nervous look and

Dr. Owens rubbed at his face. I was starting to doubt this was all a setup by the bad men to get me back. By now, the lab would have simply reverted to force to get me to comply. I remember like it was yesterday how they'd beat me into submission. But the situation at hand was completely different than how I was used to doctors and lab workers treating me. These two men were cautious, scared of me almost. It was almost as if there was a certain respect towards me in the air. They fully knew what I was capable of, what I had done to

bad men in my past. They wanted to earn my trust rather than force me into behaving.

The old man raised his eyes back up to meet mine. I could see the gears working in his head.

"Eleven, I need you to trust me okay? I understand that must be incredibly hard for you, but I need you to try. Would it help if I told you everyone is waiting down the hall for you?"

That's what got me, *Mike*.

He's here, and so is Hopper and Joyce. Probably Will and Jonathan too since they were at the house when I...I really don't know what happen to me. That small bit of news perked me right up, and I knew Dr. Owens could read my change in demeanor immediately.

"Alright, I see that I've got your attention now."

I relaxed my muscles slightly and nodded. He gave me a small smile, "Okay, so I will let you see everyone shortly, but I need you to stay calm, answers my questions honestly, and listen. Can you do that for me?"

After a moments hesitation, I nodded once again in agreement. There have been worse deals I've made.

"From the start, what is the last thing you remember before you collapsed?"

The blonde doctor grabbed a notepad, clipboard, and was staring at me expectantly. I might have a tiny bit of faith in Dr. Owens but not any with this strange man standing next to him.

"It's okay, Eleven, this is my son Alexander. You can trust him too. He works for me now and isn't associated with the lab anymore."

I flicked my eyes between the young and old faces searching for any signs of lies. I couldn't find any.

"I was cold...the water was loud...too loud," I muttered.

"You were in the shower, correct?"

"Yes, and I felt sick and heavy. Like something was weighing me down from the inside." A memory of the recent pain made me feel nauseous.

"Did you see anything? Did your surroundings look different?"

He was talking about the Upside Down.

I understand now. He's worried that whatever episode I had was triggered by the Mind Flayer's presence. He was scared that I hadn't done my job good enough, but I respected that fear.

"No, I was still in the bathroom," he let of a sigh of relief, "I kept flashing from being too hot and too cold. I felt like I was falling."

Alexander was writing notes down and Dr. Owens continued to look at me intently. They were both actually listening to me.

"I couldn't breathe fast enough, my head hurt, and I was dizzy. Then I fell through the shower curtain. I think I tried to crawl to the toilet to throw up, but I can't really remember at that point."

I took a shaky breath in, *I never speak this much to basically strangers. I barely speak at all.* I surprised myself at how much I had just been able to say.

Both men were nodding at me. They turned towards each other to discuss something privately. With a calmer heart, I gazed around the room observing my surroundings. It was like any other doctor's office I've been in: walls bleached white, cabinets filled to the brim with various medical equipment and drugs, but there was something about this room that was familiar to me. A sensation, almost, kept coming back to me. *The restraints?*

I glanced at the worn leather gripped tightly around my wrist. Little, beige flakes were coming off in patches. It wasn't real leather, that expressed the age and use of them. Two more clasps surrounded my ankles. I stared at my bare feet repulsed at how pale and veiny they looked. I was wearing some sort of hospital gown. It wasn't scratchy like the one I had worn when I escaped the lab, this one was soft. It

exposed my legs, and I was getting cold. A trail of goosebumps crawled up my arms.

I went back to observing the cuffs, something about them kept nagging on my memory. I could only lift my wrists a few inches off the base off the bed. Two metal circles secured the cuff to the bed. Upon closer inspection I saw that the link closest to my wrist was detachable. A small bump protruded from the side indicating where the link could be unlocked and released.

My blood ran cold.

These were *my restraints*.

I could see Papa taunting me with them. He'd leave the cuffs and nothing else in my empty room. The object stood as a reminder that I was a prisoner, a tool, that had no free will or choice. These were the restraints that followed me to each assignment, sometimes used, or sometimes not, but always there reminding me of where I stood. That I could be locked up at any moment. I had almost washed this memory away, but the worn leather loops and buckles screamed "*Remember!*" I had tried so hard to forget the cruelties of the lab and all the wrongdoings done to me, but they could never truly be erased. There was always something that I would find that would lapse me into a dark and painful memory. I could find triggers in almost everything in this room alone that brought me back to that hell. I *relived* the lab practically everyday.

The two doctors were still talking quietly, when Dr. Owens finally cleared his throat. I looked up at him with wide eyes. I still felt numb and frightened by the flashback. He quickly read my features, my eyes were practically the size of dinner plates by now. I still wasn't adamant about speaking, so I glanced quickly at the leather cuffs hoping that would convey enough information. Dr. Owens recognized my message immediately.

"Alex, you can remove the restraints now," Alexander gave him a worried look, "It's alright now. She's fine."

I watched every step Alexander took towards me like a hawk. He cowered slightly under my gaze even though I was the patient cuffed

to a bed. Within seconds, the cuffs hung from the side of the bed limply. I rubbed at my wrists instinctually. They didn't really hurt, but I wasn't just used to that action having been restrained so much at the lab.

Dr. Owens gave his son another knowing look before he gave me his full attention.

The man started by describing exactly, in medical terms, what had happened to me.

"Eleven, what has happened to you is truly remarkable. When you were closing the Gate, your brain was creating such massive amounts of electrical waves that you proceeded to damage, and bruise, severely I might mention, a large majority of your brain tissue. When you were at the Byer's you were experiencing a sort of grace period associated with brain trauma."

A tap on my shoulder redirected my focus. Alexander was standing over me with a small cup of water and a grey, knitted blanket. He awkwardly handed the cup over, almost as if he was giving a piece of meat to a ravenous animal. He didn't want to touch me, but surprisingly he offered me a smile. I hesitated and smiled back at him too, softly, but a smile nonetheless. He stepped back and moved to the counter to fiddle with something. I draped the blanket across my lap and took a small sip of the water. The cool liquid instantly washed away the vile taste on my tongue. This was the best thing I'd ever had.

"While you were unconscious we put you through an MRI, which takes a pictures of your brain, and luckily there were no bleeds. Simply put, the blood vessels in your brain are strained from the amount of energy it took to close the Gate. You came very close to breaking one of the vessels and hemorrhaging from the brain, which is fatal. The stress on your brain to heal itself as quickly as possible backfired, and that is why you experienced those seizures."

I almost died. The gravity of my situation settled on me like pouring rain: heavy and choking.

"We have put you on an anti-seizure medication, or an AED, to

prevent any more relapses. We want your brain to heal and get back to what it was. You will be on medication for the next 2 to 4 weeks to allow proper healing without the interruption of a seizure. After that we will ween you off until you are all back to normal. Does that sound like a plan to you?"

I paused. I'd never been given such a thorough rundown in my countless experiences with doctors; let alone be asked what I thought of it.

"Yes," I said quietly.

"Okay, Eleven, now drink up," he motioned at the cup in my hand.

I took a few more tentative sips before giving in to my thirst. I downed the cup in two short gulps.

Dr. Owens gave me a satisfied smile. Alexander came up next to me holding an extra pillow. He gave me a smile as he gently propped me up to a better sitting position. Still struggling to find my words I muttered out a wispy, "Thank you."

"My son and I will package up your medication, review your scans for the last time, and check your vitals before you can leave. But I say that you can see everyone now," Dr. Owens announced with a smile.

A warmth burst through my chest like fire to paper.

I could cry at the thought of seeing them: my friends, Joyce, Hopper, and *Mike*. I wanted to see them so bad. I need to see them and show them I'm okay now. My chest was rising quicker and quicker at the anticipation of our reunion. I had no idea how long I'd been in this room. It could've been hours or even a few days. I had no way of telling time. *Were they here in this building?*

The two doctors must've read my expression easily because they both chuckled. Alexander spoke up, "They're still here. I'll go retrieve them for you."

I smiled widely at the thought of seeing their faces, of feeling their embrace. They looked surprised that I could actually smile so wide, but I didn't care one bit. I could feel a physical pull to them now.

I watched his blonde head walk out of the room before glancing back to Dr. Owens. He was studying my expression seriously. He was every bit a doctor in most of his behaviors: calculating, presuming, and curious. Butterflies filled my stomach, but I couldn't tell if it was from his unnerving stare or my anxiety at seeing my family again. Oh God, my *family*.

All of a sudden, the door burst open with a smack. A midnight head stumbled into view, and a

star-dusted face searched the room frantically. Tears were pooled in his eyes. *Mike*.

His eyes landed on me and instantly everything was right with the world again. His face lifted and a smile was brought to his cherry lips.

I beamed at him. My heart was a bird released from its cage. I breathed in the freshest lungful of air, and I was rejuvenated. He was my everything.

He moved swiftly over to me and gathered me in his arms. My arms were wrapped around his neck and I was practically hanging from his standing form. He gripped my waist like a steel vise. He smelled like pine needles and his sweater was musty. Tears coursed down my cheeks. It was like a piece of me had been put back together; my puzzle was complete in this moment.

"Mike," I was so happy to be with him, you could hear the smile in my voice.

"Hey El," he mumbled into my hair. His voice was thick with tears.

He moved back to take in my face. Relief rang clear in his eyes. I could see the worry piled up, but in this moment, his dark eyes shown with solace and happiness. His hair brushed his brow in slight waves, and a smile hovered on his lips. He had an almost astonished expression on his face.

"I promised I wouldn't leave you."

Mike's lips parted enough that his front teeth were visible behind the

rosy flesh. The corners of his mouth quivered as he remembered the same words I had spoken to him barely a day ago. His eyes were glued to mine, they kept flickering back and forth absorbing some sort of information I couldn't discern. I felt his fingers curl around my ear as he smiled. It was the most beautiful smile to grace the earth: full teeth, lips stretched, cheeks pulled from ear to ear. He looked *happy*.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen him so joyful. Every time I visited him in the Void, even if he was laughing with friends, a shadow draped over him that I couldn't remove. This time, the cloud was gone. His eyes were clear, his mind clean and open. *He's happy*.

I suddenly realized that only inches were separating his face from mine. Under any other circumstances I might've been embarrassed or shy, but everything was perfect in our little moment. A reunion within a reunion. When we embraced in the living room before the showdown, the moment was relieving yet short lived. Now I felt like I had all the time in the world to simply stare at him.

I searched his face once more. Freckles adorned every surface of his cheekbones and nose. There were little specks of black and amber in his brown eyes I'd never seen before. They gave his eyes a glowing warmth that I was just drinking up.

His eyes flicked down to my lips for just a second before he ran his eyes down the length on my body. A worrisome expression clouded Mike's features. His brow was drawn close together, forming that little wrinkle I knew too well from my time in the Void, he appeared to be checking me for injuries. *This must have been so scary for him*.

I don't like to assume things, but I'm sure Mike was concerned for me. We have never given our relationship a title other than friends, but I know somewhere in my heart we were much more than friends. I don't feel about Mike the way I do with Dustin or Lucas. *Mike is special*.

I could tell from the lost focus in Mike's eyes that he was deep in thought. He kept tracing his eyes from my feet to my face like a pendulum. Clouds filled his gaze and his lips were protruding in the slight pout he adopts whenever he is thinking. *He's thinking about me*.

"Mike, I'm okay."

He instantly looked me in the eye. Layers of emotion were peeling away like wet paper. Fear, horror, worry, guilt. They all flipped through his eyes in a matter of seconds. Mike brought a hand up to my cheek and cupped my face gently.

"I was so scared El. Y..you were...Oh God I thought I was going to lose you," his voice trembled. His eyes were growing glossy and I could feel my throat tightening.

I pressed my forehead against his. He let out a slow, shaky breath as he tried to calm down. I moved my hands behind his neck, holding him close to me.

"I'm never going to leave you."

A small, tearful gasp escaped his lips and he wrapped me into a tight hug. I could feel his heart beating where our chests were pressed together. Mike was warm and comforting. I closed my eyes and pressed my cheek into his neck. He gripped my waist tighter and began a slow rocking motion.

I moved with the slight wave of his body as he cried.

After a moment, I raised my eyes to look behind us. *Everyone's here.*

Hopper and Joyce stood with Dr. Owens and Alexander in the middle of the room. Jonathan and Will stood close behind them. My heart leapt at the sight of them. Hop had a shocked expression, his eyes were wide and his mouth was hanging open. Joyce was gripping her mouth trying to stifle a sob, as was Will I noticed.

Slowly I pulled back from Mike's embrace. He looked at me questioningly, his eyes looked like pools of melted chocolate with all the tears spilling from them. I glanced behind me, and his eyes followed.

He jerked away from me and began furiously rubbing at his eyes while his head hung low. I immediately missed his sweet warmth.

Hop was at my side in two seconds flat. He scooped me in his arms.

My arms didn't reach all the way around his middle but I hugged him back with as much force as I could muster.

"You really scared me there kid," his voice was breathy and quick.

"I'm sorry. I never wanted to scare you," a sob crouched in the back of my throat, thickening my voice.

"It's okay. You're okay now. Everything's gonna be fine."

His deep voice soothed me. It was a familiar rumble that I had heard countless times in the cabin. It was a voice I could recognize anywhere.

He pulled back and looked at my face. Two streaks of saltwater glistened on each cheek but a watery smile adorned his mouth.

"You really got me there."

Hop pulled me in for a second hug. He kissed the top of my head lovingly. It dawned on me he had never done that before. We had hugged before, but we had been fighting so much lately our bond had never had the chance to grow so affectionate. I craned my neck to look up at him. I smiled at him hoping to convey as much apology and appreciation as possible. Hop smiled in return

and took a few steps back to allow Joyce to fit herself in.

She beamed at me, relief clear in her eyes, and pulled me in a firm squeeze.

"Oh sweetie, I was so worried about you," a frantic, motherly expression fell on her features, "Are you okay, how are you feeling?"

"Better," I smiled slightly. Her maternal nature was radiating off her and it was wildly comforting.

"Good, that's good. We are going to make you all better. I promise," she pulled me into another hug which I smiled into. It was so easy to be around Joyce. She was a mother in every aspect and I felt so comfortable around her.

When Joyce stepped back, I took in the crowd surrounding me once again. Hop had moved to the side to speak with the two doctors, presumably about my medications and what not. Will and Jonathan has moved from the door.

They walked up to my bedside both with pensive expressions. Will was looking at the ground, but Jonathan was looking right at me. He seemed to be deep in thought when he said, "I'm really glad you're okay."

I have him a small smile when Will suddenly looked up. Within seconds he tackled me into a hug sobbing his eyes out. I was shocked for a moment at the suddenness of it all. I realized there was a special bond growing between us. Maybe it was because we both have come so close to death in the past few days, maybe it was our experience with the Upside Down, or maybe we simply had shared trauma. Whatever it was, it had created a bond that was almost indescribable. I knew how he was feeling because I too have felt his pain. In every way, shape, and form, I have felt the pain Will has gone through and beyond. I could sense a feeling of debt within him. I had saved his life, twice now, and he couldn't think of how to thank me. I wanted to explain that I didn't need any of that, but I could just tell that wasn't how he operated. I gripped him hard and strong, rubbing small circles on his back.

After a minute he calmed down enough to pull back and look me in the eye. His face was puffy and blotchy from too much crying. He had a look of desperation in his watery eyes. I reached for his hands and held them firmly between my own.

"It is over now. You are okay, Will. I'm okay."

And with those simple words, Will's entire face softened with relief. He removed a hand to swipe at his eyes before grasping my hands in a final squeeze. He turned towards Jonathan whose open arms greeted him.

Mike emerged from the background and he came up to my bedside. His eyes were bloodshot but he was no longer crying. He sniffled a few times and I stretched my arm to reach for his hand. I rubbed small circles over his knuckles. He was much cleaner than the last

time I saw him. No longer was dirt and grime caked in his palm. His hair was soft and shining slightly in the fluorescent lighting. His white skin gleamed against my own grimy hands. I never really had the chance to shower due to the whole almost dying fiasco. *I'm disgusting.*

"Help me up?" I looked up at Mike. He was staring at me with a concerned look in his eyes, but he regained some ounce of composure when I looked at him.

"Always," he smiled at me. My insides turned to mush. *Mike, always the caretaker.*

He gripped each of my hands and gently pulled me off the stack of pillows propping me up. Every muscle groaned with the effort, begging me to stop. Whatever medication I was on wasn't doing anything to numb the pain. I winced at the sharp spike of pain coursing through my skull. I could feel Mike's fingers tense up in my hands. I hung my head between my outstretched arms and breathed deeply. My nerves were fried and I could feel the nausea building. Mike moved my hands to rest on his shoulders while he placed his own around my waist. Slowly, he helped me shuffle into a more sitting position. *I just can't wait until everything isn't so hard anymore.*

At long last, I opened my eyes and looked to where Mike was now sitting on the bed next to me. He was adjusting the blankets surrounding my legs. The fabric must have slipped because one of my slender feet poked through the gap.

I couldn't help but smile at the kind act. Mike caught me staring and quickly looked down at his hands in his lap. I could see him smiling through the blush on his cheeks. I placed a hand on his shoulder lightly, "Thank you."

Mike moved his gaze from his lap to meet mine. *Oh, he's beautiful.* The way his sharp cheek bones swept into his mop of jet-black hair and the emphasis on the fullness of his lips made my heart flutter. I wanted him to kiss me.

I'd seen plenty of kissing on the soaps I'd watch for hours on end. It took me a while, but I was able to relate when Mike touched his lips

on mine in the cafeteria a year earlier, to what kissing actually meant. It meant connection and caring deeper than friends for someone. It meant *love*.

I still didn't quite understand how love was supposed to feel. Nobody had ever loved me before. Except for Mama, but she can't remember that anymore. I feel that Hop could love me one day, we just need more time. I really want to know what love feels like and to love someone back. *I want Mike to kiss me.*

"So let's get everyone up to date on your status now shall we? I think it'll be good if everyone can help you out these next few weeks," Dr. Owens's voice jerked me from my dreamy thoughts.

I looked to the old man and nodded my head slightly. I was still brushing the remnants of my daydream away when he began to address the small crowd in the room.

"As you all know, Eleven has given us quite the fright in recent hours. When we put her through the MRI, her brain appeared to be injured from the enormous amount of effort it took her to close the Gate. Simply put, Eleven's brain has crossed its limit. Her blood vessels are stretched and thin, but her brain was still swelling. Her brain is cross-firing in all different directions. It is trying to heal itself without having the means to do so. This stress is what gave her the seizures."

Dr. Owens paused for a moment, allowing his audience to catch up. Mike was listening intently to every word, while Hop was gazing distantly at the floor.

"She is on anti-seizure medication as well a strong anti-inflammatory and a steroid. We want to stop the cranial swelling and also give her some relief from the pain," I couldn't help but scoff at that point. *Everything still hurts.*

"The side effects of the medication can include fatigue, nausea, dry mouth, dizziness, and lack of appetite. It's up to all of you to make sure she rests and eats and drinks well. Lots of fluids for you little lady," Dr. Owens gave me a knowing smile, but I didn't really know how to respond. I didn't know how exactly to communicate with this man.

"Good news is that the brain heals itself much quicker than the rest of the body. We'll keep you on medication for the next 2 to 4 weeks. You will slowly be weaned off the medication, and hopefully, you'll be good as new. Oh, and absolutely no using your powers of any kind. We can't afford to make your delicate situation any harder," He folded his hands together to signify the end of his explanation.

"Joyce, can I speak with you a minute?" Hopper asked. She nodded her head and the two stepped into the hallway. Jonathan watched them silently while Will fiddled with his hands. I could tell he was uncomfortable in this place. I hope we can all leave soon.

I turned my head to look at Mike; he was absently drawing lines across my knuckles. His brow was still furrowed with worry despite the positive feedback from Dr. Owens.

"Mike, I'm going to be fine," my voice drew his watery eyes back to mine, "Everything is going to be okay now. I promise."

He smiled that soft, beautiful grin I knew so well. He sniffed once and rubbed at his eyes. In one fluid motion, Mike wrapped an arm around me pulling me close as I leaned into him and placed my head on his shoulder. I let out a deep sigh of content.

He rubbed my arm up and down soothingly as he spoke, "I'm never letting you out of my sight again. I'm going to keep you safe."

He looked into my eyes deeply. I pressed my forehead against his and continued to breath him in.

We sat there for a few minutes, just holding each other close, before Hopper and Joyce reentered the room.

We looked at them expectantly for a moment.

Joyce spoke up, "El, you'll be staying with us for a few more days while Hop fixes up the cabin alright?" It shouldn't take very long, but he doesn't want you there without reliable heat and all that broken glass."

"Yeah. Okay," I nodded my head against Mike's shoulder.

"I can help you if you want. I'm not very good with tools but I can help clean," Mike offered. I could tell from his sound of voice that he was hesitant about spending any amount of time with Hop. I can't blame him really, this past year has been hell for us all.

"Sure, Mike, I can teach you a thing or two about woodworking," Hop replied. He also sounded hesitant at the offer, but his gruff nature was softening slightly the more time we spent around all this medical equipment. *This must remind him so much of Sara.*

"I can help too. I want to, I mean, if you'll let me," this time it was Will's voice. He had barely spoken at all this whole time so this small comment surprised me.

"I'm always here too. I'm sure I can get Steve off his ass at some point," Jonathan joined in Will's offer. Will smiled at his older brother gratefully.

"Thank you boys. That's very kind of you all," Joyce smiled at them.

"How about you three come tommorrow afternoon to help out? After school of course," Hop asked the boys.

"Sure I can do that. I'll just say I'm hanging out at Will's," Mike answered.

"Yeah I can do that," Will seconded. Jonathan nodded his head as well.

"Well, I think that settles everything then. I will gather up your medications and any further instructions. You can go home now, Eleven."

I smiled at the thought. *Home.*

Alexander walked over to where Mike and I were still seated on the bed. Mike's hands instinctively tightened against mine. He didn't know this man any better than I did. I traced a small circle with my thumb over his knuckles and he relaxed instantly.

"Do you think you can walk out of here? Or do you want the wheelchair?"

It hadn't really crossed my mind, but from going off just how hard it was for me to even sit up I knew which one to choose.

"Wheelchair," I was a bit embarrassed to be needing to be wheeled out of here. I was just so damn tired of hurting though.

"Jonathan and Mike, Will you help her off the bed while I grab the chair?"

"Of course."

Alexander went to the back room, and in a few seconds, he was rolling the wheelchair through the door way.

"Okay, I want you to each pick a side of her. Support her underneath her thigh and under her shoulder."

Within seconds, I was sitting in the wheelchair. The seat was much to big for someone my size. I could easily fit two of me in there. Mike turned around and grabbed the forgotten blanket and draped it across my naked legs. I hadn't realized how cold I was until the soft fabric once again was warming my skin.

Joyce was standing near the exit with one arm over Will's shoulders and a paper bag clasped in the other. Hopper was talking quietly with Dr. Owens.

"I'm ready."

My voice caught everyone's attention. Jonathan walked over to hold open the door for everyone. Mike was behind me pushing the wheelchair carefully forwards. I craned my neck to the two doctors, "Thank you." They each smiled at me and Alexander gave me a little wave as I was wheeled out of the room. Hop followed Mike and I close behind. The hallway was dim but opened through another door into a bright lobby. An old woman was sitting by the desk, but she was overly focused on her knitting to pay us any attention.

"I'll go pull the car around," Hop said as he exited the building.

Joyce came over to me and started stroking my hair as we all watched Hopper pull the car up through the glass windows. The sun

had almost set completely, but it left a brilliant golden hue in the air.

Mike wheeled me outside as we followed the others.

The air was crisp and a cool breeze washed over my cheeks. The smell of wet leaves and fresh grass dampened the air.

Just as before, Mike and Jonathan lifted me into the back seat of Hopper's truck. Mike pushed me in slightly as he climbed in right next to me. As everyone else piled into the overstuffed car, Mike clasped my fingers with his own. He pressed his chin atop my head and tucked mine against his chest. His breathing was steady and his heartbeat was no longer panicked.

I looked across out the window as we pulled out of parking lot. We had left the wheelchair and blanket in the middle of the lot. No one had bothered to put it back. I smiled at the image and snuggled deeper into Mike.

With the golden light filling the air, a calmness washed over me. A pleasant, sleepy feeling filled my chest and I closed my eyes. But this time I knew I was going to wake up. I knew I was going to be okay. *Everything is going to be okay now.*